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BOOK 1

THE HEART-SHAPED BIRTHMARK

The Persuaders!

FREDERICK E. SMITH

Based on the exciting ABC Television series
starring Tony Curtis and Roger Moore

Danny was watching Brett, who had reached the wall beneath the side door. As he leapt up and clicked the switches that plunged the study into darkness, Danny dived across the room to the desk. Outside there was a shout and two more shots ripped into the darkened room. Waiting, Danny raised his arm and felt inside the middle drawer. His fingers touched something cold and he gave a grunt of satisfaction as he pulled out a large Navy revolver. Checking it was loaded, he crawled back to the french windows. As he heard footsteps on the gravel outside he jumped forward and fired three shots in quick succession. A second later there was a gasp and a cry of pain. As he fired again, Danny discovered Brett was standing alongside him. The Englishman's voice was ice-cool "Ready to go?"

And Don't Miss

THE PERSUADERS!

Book Two

Also available from Ballantine Books

THE PERSUADERS!

Book One

Frederick E. Smith

Based on screenplays by

Irian Clemens and Milt Gelman

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OVERTURE

Based on the screenplay by

Brian Clemens

CHAPTER ONE

The large executive jet banked spectacularly over the bay. Below, white-sailed yachts lay like gulls on the turquoise sea. Golden beaches flanked by luxurious hotels curved into the blue haze of distance. Expensive cars crawled down palm-fringed esplanades. Behind the white, sun-soaked city, mountains rose serenely into the cloudless sky.

The jet banked again, a beautiful bird that appeared uncertain whether to continue its lazy drifting or to return to earth. Inside its sleek body, the door from the flight deck opened and the captain stepped into the executive suite. Although the suite was furnished for business, it was clearly business with a difference, for a well-appointed bar stood in one corner, a piano in another, and four luxurious chairs were scattered in random elegance on deep-pile carpeting. Exotic pictures lined the walls and taped music drowned the hum of the engines. It was a decor that might have belonged to a nightclub but for the long, low couch that ran diagonally across the floor, with its back to the flight deck.

The captain, a wiry man in his early forties, paused a couple of yards from the couch and gave a discreet cough. When its occupants remained invisible, he coughed again. This time a dark, tousled head appeared. Its owner, a good-looking, nuggety man, tanned and wearing an expensive leather jacket, gave the captain an amused 'must you?' look. The captain looked appropriately apologetic.

Tm sorry to bother you, sir. But we're coming in to land at Nice airport.'

A girl's head rose up alongside the man's. It was blonde, also tousled, and stunningly beautiful. The rest of the girl was clothed in a disarrayed hostess' uniform. Her red lips were pouting. 'Mr Danny Wilde. You can't drive off now!'

Danny Wilde nibbled at her humorously before turning back to the captain.

His grin, showing firm white teeth, had a boyish quality. His accent was American. 'Couldn't you fly around Europe, Captain? Just one more time?'

The pilot hid his smile. 'I must keep to my flight plan, sir. Otherwise we could get into trouble with the airport authorities.'

Danny Wilde sighed. 'All right, Captain. But take her down nice and slowly.'

The jet swept in to land ten minutes later. When Danny appeared at the door, the captain, first officer and three girl hostesses were standing formally to attention at the foot of the steps. Amused but playing his part to perfection, Danny started down the steps towards them. He shook hands with the two men and kissed the cheeks of the first two girls in de Gaulle fashion. The last girl in line was the blonde hostess of the couch and Danny's grin broadened as he came opposite her. Fumbling in his pocket he pulled out a jewelled pin and fastened it on the lapel of her uniform. As he reached forward to kiss her, his loud whisper made the other two girls giggle:

'For services above and beyond the call of duty, darling.'

With a wink he started towards a brand-new 'Dino' Ferrari where customs officials were carrying out a private VIP check of his luggage. After half a dozen steps he half turned and called back to the captain: 'Oh, don't forget to thank Mr Sullivan for the use of his plane, will you?'

With a last wave at the girls, he approached the car, red, powerful, low-slung, and gleaming. An attendant was already piling his cleared cases into the rear seat. Taking the invoice from a haughty-looking salesman, Danny made an admiring circuit of the car before glancing at the price. With a humorous grimace, he took out his wallet and handed all the notes in it to the surprised salesman. As the man stared down at the bundle of notes, Danny made a sign he wanted no change and held his hand out for the keys. The salesman, rendered in seconds from pomposity to unctuousness, bowed low and surrendered them. As Danny walked round to the driver's seat he realized he was still carrying his empty wallet and with a nonchalant shrug tossed it to the ground. The salesman, still clutching the bundle of notes, stared after the American with dazed eyes as, hurling back pebbles and dust, the Ferrari shot away towards the perimeter road.

The driver of the luxurious bronze Aston-Martin glanced at the girl alongside him and pointed to a road sign ahead. 'This is it. The road forks a couple of hundred yards ahead. You go left, I go right.'

The girl nodded. Very attractive, she was dressed in a low-cut shirt and abbreviated shorts that revealed her slender, tanned legs. A rucksack lay on the carpet at her feet. Her sigh, sounding over the smooth purr of the engine, made it more than clear she was not looking forward to the parting.

The Aston-Martin rounded a corner. To the left a road forked past a white-washed cottage and swung upwards towards blue-hazed mountains. To die right the main road was sign-posted NICE and swung down to the distant sea.

Driven with practised skill, the Aston-Martin glided a few yards past the turning and drew to a halt. Pulling on the handbrake, the driver turned to the girl. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, handsome man with brown hair and a slightly quizzical smile. Although he was casually dressed in a silk shirt and fawn slacks, he wore a certain air that suggested a man not unused to privilege. Brett Sinclair might and mostly did mix with lesser favoured mortals, but his membership of the British House of Lords had set its distinctive mark on him.

He was giving the girl his attractive smile as she fumbled to gather together the straps of her rucksack 'It's a pity, I agree, but even the best journeys have to end some rime. Let me help you out.'

Before he could move to leave the car the girl turned and threw her arms around him. The act was spontaneous but the kiss was hard and long, and when she pulled away it was done quickly as if haste might ease the pain of parting. Pushing her rucksack out of the car she stood a moment staring at him, her eyes large with regret. Then, with an exclamation, she turned and hurried back to the branch road.

For a moment Brett sat staring at her shapely figure almost wistfully. Then his eyes focused on the rear seat where two more girl hitch-hikers, both more beautiful than the one just departing, were eyeing him eagerly. His quizzical smile came again. 'Next one, please.'

With a giggle one of the girls clambered over the seat and dropped alongside him. The other girl pouted, leaned forward, and laid a seductive hand on his shoulder. The Aston-Martin purred again and glided away down the Nice road. As has been said already, Brett Sinclair was not unused to privilege.

The tremendous blast of the car horn sent a flock of birds shooting straight into the air like a bomb-burst of jets. The two girl hitch-hikers spun round. Down the narrow feeder road that led to the airport perimeter, a low-slung Ferrari was growling its frustration. The object of its anger was the Aston-Martin that Brett had casually parked across the road exit while he dropped off his two passengers.

Brett, who was kissing the first girl goodbye when the blast sounded, showed by only a cocked eyebrow that he had heard it. As he embraced the second eager girl, the air shuddered to a barrage of angry blasts. Without favouring Danny with even a glance, Brett stood a moment waving to the girls and then moved with pointed slowness to his driver's seat. As he started lazily away, the Ferrari came out of the feeder road like a released tiger, rounded the corner on screeching tyres and went snarling up the road. Smiling, Brett turned and drove in the opposite direction.

An observer in a helicopter would have been amused to follow the progress of the two cars from that moment onwards. In his impatience Danny had taken the longer route to Nice and after a kilometre was forced to turn off down a

minor road. The road Brett took was the opposite side of an equilateral triangle whose apex was the entrance to the fast auto-route that ran to Nice. As both cars swung round the tight corners, the Aston-Martin less hurriedly than the Ferrari, it became obvious there would be little difference in the time the two cars ran out on the auto-route.

In fact, the coincidence of vectors was absurd. As Brett's Aston-Martin glided beneath the underpass and waited for a break in the traffic before entering the auto-route, Danny's Ferrari surged up alongside him. With the driver's seat of the two cars on the right and left sides respectively, the two men were only feet apart. As they exchanged uncomplimentary glances, each one began gunning his engine almost subconsciously. Both men recognized the inference as their stares crossed again. Without words, they were offering one another a challenge.

Their eyes turned to the stream of traffic ahead. Like racing drivers on the grid, they sat motionless, building up their concentration. Cars zipped past, followed by a heavy lorry. Its passing, leaving a momentary gap in the traffic, acted like a starting signal. With a roar of gunned engines both cars leapt out and streaked away neck and neck.

They passed the stream of cars as if it were standing. The road swung to the left, beneath a bridge. Danny's car, being on the inside, gained a few yards; Brett, his expression showing both annoyance and determination, held in Danny's slipstream for a moment, then, with a racing-car change, surged past him. Grinning, Danny clung to him for half a minute, then, as the nearside lanes became empty, tried to pass on the inside. On his second attempt he slipped through and gained a few yards before Brett hauled him back. Neck and neck again, the two powerful cars screamed down the auto-route.

There was a marked difference now in the glances the two men gave one another. Each had recognized a driving skill that matched his own and although their rivalry remained fierce it was now based on respect.

A large road sign flashed past. Brett motioned to it and waved a farewell hand. He believed the hand Danny waved back was an acknowledgement the race was over. Instead, as he slowed to take the turn, the Ferrari went with him and shot ahead. Grinning, Brett put his foot down and went after it. Unable to pass on the narrow road, the two cars raced nose to tail in a cloud of red dust. A startled chicken saw them coming and, with a squawk of terror, dived for cover in a vineyard.

A kilometre passed with the two cars still locked together. On their left a magnificent hotel towered into the blue sky. It was approached from the road by a wide horseshoe drive. Danny had noticed the sign three hundred yards back but in his desire to keep ahead of Brett he missed the first entrance and had to brake violently for the second. Expecting Brett to come shooting past, he saw die Aston-Martin was turning into the first entrance. Growling with surprise, Danny hurled the Ferrari forward in a shower of gravel. The Aston-Martin was rounding the other arm of the horseshoe with equal alacrity.

Neither man braked until the last moment and the two cars jerked to a halt beneath the hotel steps with no more than the thickness of a bus ticket between their front bumpers.

The drivers jumped out. Without their cars, the common bond between them was broken and both showed their wariness in their over-casual behaviour and their pointed refusal to acknowledge the other as they turned towards the hotel steps. A bellman, making down the steps, veered towards Danny as the American called him. With a grunt of satisfaction Danny reached into the rear of the Ferrari. Pulling two valises towards him, he lowered them to the ground. As he turned for the bellman, his satisfied expression changed. The man was making up the steps carrying Brett's cases, with the Englishman in close attendance. At the hotel entrance Brett gave Danny a quizzical glance that clearly stated this was a race he had won. Face burning, Danny began pulling the rest of his baggage from the Ferrari.

As Brett entered the hotel a receptionist came out deferentially from his office. 'Lord Sinclair. How nice to see you again.'

"Hello, Henri. How is Michelle? And your two children?'

'Very well, thank you, my lord. Pierre, the older one, began school three months ago.'

'Did he?' Brett smiled. "Then you'll soon be busy doing his homework for him.'

Tm afraid so, my lord.' The gratified receptionist moved towards the lifts. Tour suite has been prepared for you, my lord. If you would care to come this way...'

Checking him, Brett pulled out an engraved invitation card from his pocket. 'Who's giving this party, Henri?'

'Party, my lord?'

Brett handed him the card. 'What else can it be but a party? Only I'd like to know who's giving it. Don't you know?'

The man gazed at the card. 'No, my lord. I know nothing about it except that all your expenses are being taken care of.'

At the office desk, Danny was showing a similar engraved card to a second receptionist. 'You see what it says - "Please be my guest at the Hotel Romano on the 23rd." That's alL What gives?'

The receptionist handed the card back to him. 'I honestly do not know, Mr Wilde. We were instructed to make reservation for you and to charge everything to the Banque de France. That is all I know.'

Danny gave his wide, boyish grin. 'Charge *everything?* The magic words! In that case you'd better tell room service to move in with me.'

The receptionist smiled and clicked his fingers at a bellboy who picked up Danny's baggage and followed the two men to the lifts. On their way they passed Brett and the other receptionist, also on their way to the lifts. None of them noticed the man watching them from a nearby telephone booth. Soberly-dressed, benign-faced and greying, he was a Frenchman in his early forties.

As Danny's small party entered a lift, he bent over the receiver. 'This is Flavel again, Monsieur Fulton. They have both checked in and are now going to their rooms.'

It was an educated English voice that answered him. 'Good. Have they met yet?'

Flavel was watching Brett move to follow Danny into the lift. Reaching quickly forward, the American jabbed a button that closed the door in the Englishman's face. As Brett, showing his annoyance, moved towards a second lift, the middle-aged Flavel gave a tight smile and lowered bis head to the receiver again.

'Yes, monsieur - they've met and it is working well. I think you can say your two fish are well and truly hooked.'

CHAPTER TWO

On the maple floor of the restaurant a few couples swayed to the cool rhythm that blended subtly with the low hum of conversation. Discreet splashes of light fell on diamond necklaces and slim, bronzed shoulders. Waiters moved unobtrusively from table to table, carrying silver trays or pushing iced tubs of champagne. Dinner at the Hotel Romano was a refined sybaritic ritual.

Half a dozen guests were seated at a long elegant bar in the foreground. Among them was Danny Wilde, sitting on a stool beside an attractive blonde. Engrossed in conversation with the girl he did not notice Brett, in beige tuxedo, frilled shirt and black bow-tie, enter the restaurant with a beautiful brunette on his arm. Acknowledging the bow of the restauranteur, Brett led the girl to the bar.

'Good evening. Two Creole Screams, please.'

The barman, burly and sporting a large moustache, looked blank. 'Monsieur?'

'Two Creole . . .' Then Brett paused. You're new here, aren't you?'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'These are the ingredients. A jigger of white rum. A dash of bitters. Chilled vermouth. *Chilled,* note - not iced. A measure of grenadine. Mix and stir in some crushed ice. Shake. Now top it off with one olive...'

'Two olives (' The interruption came from Danny who had turned away from the blonde. As Brett stared at him, the American grinned disarmingly. 'You were right all the way down the line until you got to the olive. Two olives,' he told the barman and turned back to Brett. 'That way they bounce gendy against one another in the glass and ...'

Brett's interjection disdained even a glance at the bewildered barman. *'One* olivel' He stared coldly at Danny. The spectacle of two olives bouncing together is a pleasure so dubious I think I can forgo it.'

Danny lifted his shoulders. 'One olive is just nothing. It's - it's lonely! Make

it two olives!' he told the barman. 'The gendeman will thank me for it later.'

'One olive,' Brett snapped. 'And kindly allow me to know my own mind.'

Tfour mind, sure,' Danny soothed. "But the drink's a different matter. Two olives, barman!' He turned back to Brett. 'Look. I ought to know. A Creole Scream's an American drink.'

Trom a Southern state. Created by a gendeman. An English gendeman.'

Danny hesitated. 'I don't know about that.'

Brett nodded. 'I thought the word "gendeman" would confuse you.'

Danny gave him a sharp look. 'Now hold on. I'm only trying to do you a favour.'

Brett raised an eyebrow. Then could you move farther down the bar? Or to a different restaurant? Better still, of course, you could flee the country.' Ignoring the angry Danny, he turned to the barman. 'Please go ahead. With only *one* olive.'

Danny grabbed his arm and spun him round. 'Now look, friend...'

Brett glanced round him with mock anxiety. 'Not friend, please. Someone might think you're serious.'

The brunette could not contain her amusement. Incensed, Danny pushed a hand between the lapels of Brett's tuxedo. 'As for that crack about "gentleman"...'

That was half a minute ago,' Brett said urbanely. Tou're rather slow on the uptake, aren't you?'

Breathing hard, Danny drew back his fist. Brett trapped it with his hand and for a moment both men were locked together. Brett's voice was dangerously gende. 'Why don't we go outside and setde this?'

'Why outside?' Danny asked belligerently. 'It's dark there - you might run away.'

Brett regarded him for a moment, sighed, and turned to the brunette. 'Forgive me, my dear, but this shouldn't take more than a few seconds.'

As he began removing his tuxedo, the restauranteur came hurrying over, his voice agitated. 'Lord Sinclair. Please 1'

Brett edged him gendy aside. *You needn't worry, Bruno. All damages will be paid for.'

Danny, who had overheard the restauranteur, gave a laugh of anticipation. *'Lord* Sinclair! I've never done this to a real lord before. It should be a laugh.'

He began removing his jacket. It was only halfway down his arms when Brett stepped forward and slammed a punch at him. 'Quite a laugh, my endearing American.'

With his arms still in his jacket, Danny staggered back and ended on the floor. The two girls squealed and scattered. Down the restaurant the music ceased and there were shouts of alarm and astonishment as all heads swivelled towards the bar. From the floor Danny was staring up at Brett in comical aggrievement.

'Hey, that was dirty. You're no gentleman either.'

Brett grinned down at him. 'I said you were slow on the uptake.'

Danny swayed to his feet. 'Maybe. But I learn fast.'

Without warning, with his arms still imprisoned in his jacket, he ducked and butted Brett in the stomach. As the Englishman gasped and staggered back, Danny tossed aside his jacket and went in swinging. Still winded, Brett pulled a stool out and tripped the American. Danny jumped up, glaring. Tou fight real dirty, don't you?'

Brett feinted and swung two hard punches at the wincing American. 'How do you think we lords got to be lords? Besides' - he landed another hard punch - 'I always try to adapt myself to the company I keep.'

His voice broke off as Danny ducked down, grabbed a leg, and overturned him. Danny sat on his chest and grinned down at him.

Worm's eye view?'

Arms straddled, Brett tried to rise but Danny very firmly stood on one of his hands. Wincing, Brett climbed to his feet, gripping his hand. 'Talking of dirty fighting...'

'I invented it,' Danny said, charging in again. He landed another punch on Brett but was then swung round hard against the bar and winded As glasses crashed down the brunette noticed the restauranteur talking urgently into a nearby telephone. She tried to warn Brett but by this time both men had forgotten the existence of the girls. Although Danny was winded, his head was clear, and as Brett moved in swinging punches, the American swayed expertly without moving his feet and dodged four punches in a row. He grinned tantalizingly. 'Tricky, ehl A friend of mine - a light-heavy - taught me...'

His self-satisfaction was cut short as Brett's fifth punch landed squarely on his jaw, sending him through the open hatch of the bar. There was another crash of glass and a long pause before Danny reappeared, looking groggy. 'That's one way to lose a friend,' he muttered.

Hands at his sides, smiling, Brett moved right up against the bar. As Danny reacted by swinging a punch, Brett avoided it by moving only his head, much in the way the American had done. 'It's quite simple,' he murmured as he avoided two more hard swings. 'Just a matter of perfect tim—'

On the last syllable his luck also ran out and a punch on the side of the face sent him staggering backwards. Danny laughed and vaulted lightly over the bar. 'Nobody's perfect.'

Tfou should know,' Brett said, shaking his head and recovering.

Neither heard the dying wail of a police siren as they began exchanging punches again. Equally matched as they were, the only obvious loser was the bar which was covered in broken glass and strewn with upturned stools. Danny was just picking up a stool to throw at Brett when whistles shrilled out and police rushed into the room. Yelling a warning, Brett grabbed Danny's arm but before the two men could run they were surrounded. The American gave a grimace of disgust. 'Saved by the bell.'

Brett had picked up his tuxedo and was coolly brushing dust off it. 'A timely intervention. You were showing such distress I was afraid another punch might seriously harm you.'

As Danny lurched forward again, the restauranteur rushed between them. 'Please, gentlemen! I beg you to go quietly.'

Escorted by the uniformed men, the two men moved towards the door. As they reached it, Danny stood aside and waved Brett on. 'This is one time you can go first.'

Brett nodded urbanely. 'At least you appear to have found out who is the better man.'

Two of the police grabbed hold of the American. As the struggling party disappeared through the door, the blonde and brunette came into sight and stared at one another. •What happens now?' the blonde muttered.

The brunette hesitated, then moved firmly towards the wrecked bar. 'I know what's going to happen to *me.'* She called her order to the shaken barman. 'A Creole Scream. With *one* olive.'

The blonde's face lightened and she slid her shapely thighs onto a stool alongside the brunette. 'That's a marvellous idea. I'll have the same.'

'With one olive also?' the barman asked her.

The girl considered for a moment, then a dimple appeared beside her full mouth. 'No. I'd better make mine two. Just in case.'

Steadying himself, Danny tried to peer through the narrow barred window of the speeding police van. The glass was murky and all he could see was a dark unrolling stretch of road. Muttering something, he turned. Brett was seated calmly on a bench, his legs stretched out across the dimly-lit van. Danny eyed him morosely.

'How much? I want to know.'

Brett yawned and did not answer. Danny tried again. 'I asked you what the damage was. Are you going to tell me or not?'

'Not,' Brett said laconically.

'Now look, Charlie. I want to pay my corner.'

'My dear fellow, I wouldn't hear of it.'

"But I'm insisting.'

'I'm sorry. But it's a matter of tradition.'

'What's tradition got to do with it?'

Before Brett could reply, die engine roared noisily as the driver changed gear for a hill. Shrugging, Brett leaned his head against the side of the van and closed his eyes. When the engine note fell, making conversation possible again, he gave a yawn. 'It's tradition the winner pays. Surely even you must know that.'

For a moment the American did not follow him. 'All I want to do is . . .' Then the penny dropped and Danny jerked round. *What do you mean - winner?'

Brett stretched his legs out more comfortably. 'Surely it's obvious. If we hadn't been interrupted ...'

'If we hadn't been interrupted, you'd still be out cold. I was pulling my punches. Taking it easy on you because you looked kind of frail.'

Brett opened an eye. 'Frail?'

*Yeah. Sort of puny, if you know what I mean.'

'My dear fellow, do try not to be so fatuous. If you can't defeat me with your clumsy fists, you can hardly hope to defeat me with words.'

Danny was beginning to enjoy himself again. 'I said puny. P-U-N-Y.'

By this time both of Brett's eyes were open. 'I'm glad to hear you can spell, if only four-letter words,' he said coldly. *You have, however, chosen an unfortunate one, as you'll discover when we are released from this van.'

'What's wrong with things as they are?' Danny demanded.

Brett sat upright. 'Nothing's wrong with things as they are.'

'All right, then. Throw one of your puny punches at me and see what happens.'

As the men stared at one another, the van pulled to a sudden halt, pitching Danny over Brett's legs. As they untangled themselves, the threat of immediate aggression over, the engine went silent. Brett glanced at Danny and then moved to die rear window. 'It looks as if we've arrived.'

Danny came alongside him. 'Where are we? Police headquarters?'

'I can't tell. It's too dark outside.'

Both men listened but could hear nothing. 'For cops, they're pretty quiet, aren't they?' Danny muttered. 'What gives?'

As if in answer, a sudden click made both men start. The rear door of the van swung open a couple of inches. The two men exchanged glances, then Danny gave the door a shove. As it opened wider they saw a gravel drive behind them, flanked by shrubs and bushes. The sudden hoot of an owl made the silence more eerie. They listened a moment more and then, impatient with their caution, swung themselves down to the drive.

They stood gazing curiously around them. The low background throb of cicadas added to the silence. The van was standing in the driveway of a large villa whose square white shape rose dramatically against the starlit sky. A bat, swooping down the driveway, made Danny duck his head. As he was about to make a comment, the van engine fired with a suddenness that made both men start. A second later the van shot away down the drive. Brett ran after it, then realized the futility as the van drove between two wrought-iron gates and disappeared along the road beyond. He stood listening a moment to its receding engine, then turned back in disgust to Danny.

*Why didn't we think of looking in the cab?'

Danny was gazing again at the silent villa. 'I guess we were too busy trying to figure out where they'd brought us.'

'It might be some new kind of prison.'

Danny shook his head. 'It's not like any jail I've ever seen. Let's go and take

a closer look.'

Their footsteps sounded loud on the gravel as they made for the elegant front door of the villa. The white stone building towered over them, seemingly empty of life. Brett found a bell chain and gave it a tug. The hollow clang of a bell deep inside the house gave no promise of an answer. Danny stepped back a few paces. 'If I didn't know better, I'd expect Boris Karloff to open the door,' he muttered. Then, as Brett was about to pull the bell again, he heard the American's excited whisper. 'Hey, English. Come here!'

Brett moved back alongside him and saw a yellow light had appeared behind a pair of french windows twenty yards to their right It was moving as if a lighted candelabrum were being carried into the room. As they watched, the light steadied. What do you think?' Danny whispered. 'Should we take a look?'

Brett grimaced. 'Probably not. But we'll die of curiosity if we don't.'

Like a couple of cat burglars, the two men edged their way along the front of the villa until they stood alongside the windows. Shading their eyes, they peered inside. The candelabrum was standing on a table and in its yellow light they caught a glimpse of silverware, antique furniture, tall bookcases, and a large desk. With leather armchairs, draped curtains, and pile carpets also visible, the study suggested wealth without ostentation. At another time it might have looked cosy as well as in good taste but now, with the mysterious candelabrum keeping its strange vigil, the effect was eerie to the extreme.

Both men were uncertain of their next move. Danny tentatively tried the french windows and to his surprise found they opened to his touch. Stepping aside, he offered Brett first entry. Brett declined his generosity with equal charm. 'No, after you. I insist.'

Scowling and reluctant, Danny stepped into the candlelit study. His jacket, brushing against a table, sent a small ornament thudding down to the carpet. Brett, tiptoeing after him, let out a sigh of tension. 'Must you?'

The two of them moved silently round the room, examining its contents. Reaching the desk, Danny picked up some files. His sudden whisper made Brett turn.

"Hey. Lord Fauntleroy. Come and look here!'

Brett moved over and gave a start as Danny handed him half a dozen prints. 'Photographs! Of us?'

'Curiouser and curiouser, isn't it?' Danny was nipping through other papers in the file. As he paused Brett leaned forward.

'What else have you got there?'

Danny's frown had deepened. 'Press cuttings. A lot of stuff about me.' He nipped the pages over. 'You as well.'

'Let me see.'

Before Danny could hand the files over, a curious sound from behind a door at the far side of the room alerted them. A low rumbling and the creak, of a floorboard suggested something mechanical was being rolled across the floor.

As it neared the door Danny motioned Brett to hide as he ran towards the candles and snuffed them out.

Crouching behind a desk and an armchair respectively, the two men listened intently as the rumbling ceased. A moment later there was a click and creak as the door opened. Peering from behind the desk Brett was trying to adjust his eyes to the starlight that filtered through the french windows. He could see something silhouetted in the open doorway but it appeared too low and squat to be anything human.

In the silence the two men could hear their hearts beating. Then there was a click and the electric light blazed on. Feeling both naked and foolish, they found themselves facing an elderly man in a bathchair who was smiling courteously at them.

'Good evening, gentlemen. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Fulton. Judge Fulton.'

Startled by the normality of the greeting and the urbane English voice, Brett and Danny exchanged bemused glances. The man in the bathchair wheeled himself towards a cabinet on which glasses and a silver cocktail shaker were standing. Wearing a silk dressing-gown, bald except for fringes of snow-white hair, he looked to be in his middle sixties. His freckled face was relatively unlined and given a distinguished appearance by his sun-bleached eyebrows and white moustache. He appeared relaxed and benign and yet both men felt there was steel beneath his velvet glove as he waved towards the leather armchairs.

'Please, gentlemen - make yourselves comfortable. Everything will be explained to you in a moment.'

Brett hesitated, then shrugged and dropped into an armchair. Danny did not move and the elderly man smiled at him. Tou prefer to stay on your feet, Mr Wilde?'

Danny nodded tightly. 'It's an old habit,'

The judge was occupying himself with the cocktail shaker and the glasses. 'I understand. A legacy of those old infighting days in the Bronx, no doubt.'

Danny started, but before he could speak the judge went on blandly: 'However, I take it you will have a drink with me.' He glanced at Brett. 'A Creole Scream for you, Lord Sinclair.' He dropped one olive in the glass and then turned smiling to Danny. 'And two for you, Mr Wilde. Would you be so kind as to accept your glass and offer the other to Lord Sinclair?'

Stepping cautiously forward, Danny took the glasses and handed one to Brett. The Englishman was frowning. 'Thank you. But I feel at a certain disadvantage.'

The judge nodded. 'For the moment, that is my prerogative.' His urbane voice ran on without a change of expression. 'There is one thing I would like you both to understand - you are still under arrest,' He raised his glass. 'Your health, gentlemen.'

It was Danny who found his tongue first. 'Who are you? And what's your

racket?'

He received another courteous smile. 'I have just given you my name. Judge Fulton. Admittedly I am retired but unfortunately for you both I am still very influential. I would only have to give the word to the French authorities and you both would certainly receive three months imprisonment for your behaviour tonight.'

Danny gave Brett a look of disgust, 'He makes it sound as if we've won first prize.'

The judge laughed. 'You have, Mr Wilde. Ninety days. No option of a fine and no chance of a remission. This I can arrange. Or, let us say, I might arrange.'

'Might?' Brett asked, leaning forward.

Ignoring his question, the judge turned to Danny who was cautiously tasting his cocktail. 'Let us consider you for a moment, Mr Daniel Wilde. You are irrepressible. Optimistic. You have a sense of humour. These qualities helped to pull you out of a New York slum and push you to the top of the financial tree. You made a million before you were thirty and lost that million before you were thirty-one. Since then you have made and lost half a dozen fortunes. A remarkable record because it has been done without making enemies and without forgetting friends. Now you don't bother very much. Whenever you need money, you use your financial talent to raise it. A truly remarkable talent, Mr Wilde.' He paused as Danny showed his surprise and pleasure at the unexpected compliments. Then, with sudden scorn: 'And what have you done with that talent? Give me one action of merit you have performed during the last few years! Unless you regard swanning halfway round the world and back as a worthwhile endeavour. Or gambling. Or womanizing. You've wasted yourself, Mr Wilde. You were a nobody who became somebody, and now you are a nobody again. If you disappeared tonight, no one would know you had gone.'

Brett, grinning at Danny's discomfort, was about to light a cigar. His gold lighter paused in mid-air as the judge turned sharply on him. 'In fact, Mr Wilde, you are no better than Lord Sinclair here'

Brett's lighter moved on to his cigar. He exhaled blue smoke as the judge changed the direction of his attack.

'Brett Sinclair! It is a noble name - a name that has defended freedom and won a few battles in its time. And what have you done with it? What have you done with yourself and all the advantages you were born into? How many languages do you speak, Lord Sinclair - is it six or seven? And your only use for them is to order a cocktail. The high-priced education crammed into you serves only to make you the glib tongue at a hundred mindless parties. You were born with a silver spoon and all you have ever done is lick the jam from it.'

Brett's silence as he studied his cigar suggested he was as shaken as Danny by the outburst. The judge's scornful eyes moved from one man to the other.

Two adults - both with high potential - and nothing more than playboys. I despise both of you. You're facile and foolish - a useless waste of humanity. Like children, you like fighting. Very well, Fll give you a worthwhile fight - if you can handle it. I'll make use of you or else Fll put you both away in prison for three months.'

Brett raised a scandalized eyebrow. "You do realize this is coercion. Blackmail, in fact.'

Danny's face was comical in its unease. 'So it's blackmail,' he muttered. Take a look at himl He means business and three months is ninety days. And ninety nights,' he went on meaningfully.

TTou make your point,' Brett said dryly. He turned back to the watchful judge. 'AH right. It seems you win. What have we to do?'

The judge pulled out a large photograph from the pocket of his bathchair and motioned them both towards him. They stared at the picture of a dark, lovely girl of about twenty-six.

'A doll,' was Danny's reaction.

The judge nodded. 'She calls herself Maria Lorenzo, but I suspect that is not her real name. If she is the girl I think, she will have a small, heart-shaped birthmark here,' and he prodded Danny low down on the spine.

Brett was still studying the photograph. 'Who do you think she is?'

The judge settled back in his wheelchair. 'That, gentlemen, is for you to find out.'

Both men were showing their astonishment. 'That's all we have to do?' Danny asked.

The judge was smiling again. 'A simple assignment, isn't it? Surely preferable to ninety days in the cells.'

Close to one another emotionally for the first time, the two younger men exchanged glances. Although seeing no alternative to imprisonment, both were plainly suspicious.

'Do you promise there's no catch in it?' Danny asked.

The elderly judge swung his wheelchair away so that his face was hidden from both men. ʳWhat catch can there be, gentlemen? You look for a birthmark on an attractive girl and let me know what you find. I would have thought it a most agreeable assignment for men of your taste.'

CHAPTER THREE

The club pool was a vivid stretch of light, colour, and movement. Tanned men dived and swam in the glittering water: gorgeous girls in the briefest of bikinis lay on the white rocks or beneath colourful beach parasols. White-coated waiters responded to the first call of a beckoning finger. Water splashed, ice tinkled in glasses, eyes cajoled or invited. The ambience was sunlight, sex, and wealth.

Two men, casually but expensively dressed, were making their way slowly towards the pool. Having been given the name of Maria's hotel, Danny and Brett were making their preliminary search. The American watched Brett bend down and peer beneath a slanting parasol. The long-limbed, attractive girl stretched out beneath it gave a start as she saw Brett's good-looking face and sat upright. The glance she gave him as he murmured an apology was one-third a reprimand and two-thirds an invitation.

"You're sure she'll be here?' Danny grinned as the two of them moved on towards the pool.

Brett glanced back at the smiling girl. *Who wants to be too sure? It's the uncertainties of life that give it spice.'

Danny nodded reflectively. 'Uncertainties. Yeah. I guess you get lots of those.' As Brett glanced at him, he went on: 'Looking the way you do, I mean.' Before Brett could reply, the American paused to glance behind a rock where two girls let out startled giggles and hauled their bikini tops back into place. Grinning again, Danny straightened and went on: 'I think it's the discreet, dignified bit. It's got no razzmatazz. And that's what girls go for.'

Brett gave him an icy stare. 'Do something for me. If you ever see any razzmatazz on me - brush it off. Quickly.'

'Oh, funny, funny,' Danny retorted.

Suddenly Brett was not listening. His eyes were on the far end of the pool where a tall, dark girl was picking her way through the prostrate sun-worshippers. Stunningly beautiful, she was an ice princess in the way she ignored the admiring glances coming from all sides. She was wearing a short robe over her bikini and carrying a beach bag. As the two men watched her, she crossed over to a lounging chair, removed her robe, and sank into it. Danny let out his breath.

'This you can leave to me. I'll have it wrapped up in ten minutes.'

Brett caught his arm as he started forward. 'Regrettably, I must point out we are in this together. Besides, I have a plan.'

'Go on,' Danny said eagerly.

A smile lifted a corner of Brett's mouth. 'I'll pose as an intrepid explorer, just back from the interior with my latest discovery - a neolithic ape-man. That should make it easy for you. All you have to do is gibber in your usual way.'

Danny grinned back. 'I've an even better plan. You take a swim in the pool and get into difficulties ...'

'And you dive in and save me? It's as old as the hills.'

'Not my way, Lord Fauntleroy. I hold you under. That makes me a hero. I've wiped out a scourge of mankind.' With a sudden switch, Danny turned serious and produced a coin. 'Why don't we toss for it? Heads I take first crack -tails it's you. OK?'

As Brett nodded, Danny spun the coin. Brett grabbed it in mid-air, opened his hand, and saw it was heads. Danny moved away triumphantly. 'No need to

wish me luck. Just don't take it too hard, that's alL'

Brett watched the nuggety, ebullient Danny approach the unsuspecting girl. His eyes fell on the coin in his hand. FUpping it over he saw it was double-headed. Starting after Danny, he saw he was too late. The American had walked past the girl's chair as if she were merely another attractive girl. Then he had stopped dead and spun round, his expression awestruck and his voice hoarse.

'It's incredible!'

As the surprised girl stared at him, he gave an apologetic laugh. 'I'm sorry. It's just that. .. Well, I never expected it.'

'Never expected what?' Maria asked.

'That face. Your face.'

Ts there something wrong with it?' The girl's cold voice had a fascinating Italian accent.

"Wrong with it? I should say not. That's what's so incredible. It's flawless - perfect'

Used to flattery, the girl gave a moue of scorn. But Danny was moving in fast. Sliding into a nearby chair he tried to manoeuvre himself so he could get a glimpse of the girl's naked back. Her reaction was chilly.

'Will you please go away?'

Danny looked shocked by the suggestion. 'Go? Listen, when Columbus discovered America, did he just go away? It must be hereditary. You're related - perhaps by your great-great-great-great-grandmother.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Do you know Milan?' Danny asked.

*Yes. Very well indeed.'

Danny was thrown for a moment. But only for a moment. 'Ah, well - this is quite a long way from Milan. But like it in some ways. A little town called Parolini. They have a little chapel there - called the Shrine of the Grandees . . .'

The dark girl frowned. 'The Grandees are Spanish.'

Brett, who had paused within earshot, lifted his eyes to heaven at Danny's gaffe. But Danny was nothing if not resilient. 'Yeah ... That's right. Baffled historians for centuries. Let me tell you about it.'

He edged closer, trying in vain to gain a glimpse of the girl's back. She watched him in wary fascination as he went on: 'This chapel - I go there a lot. I've a feeling for places like that. You know how it is.' He pressed a hand in the region of his solar plexus. 'They get you here somehow.'

'Please go away,' Maria said.

Danny did not hear her. 'There's a painting on the wall of this chapel. Of a girl.' Suddenly Danny changed his pace, sounding humble and awed. 'A girl reputed to be the most beautiful creature in all Italy. When I'm able, I go back just to look. She's so beautiful it makes a man feel... well... I guess humble's the only word that fits.'

High above, in one of the windows of the luxury hotels that backed on to the pool, a man was staring through a pair of binoculars at the girl and the attentive Danny. Named Covey, forty years of age, he was a thin, black-haired man with a gaunt, lined face. There was an air of resignation about him as he lowered the glasses.

'Someone's trying to make time with her again.'

He glanced back into the room where another man, Triver, was finishing a late breakfast. Fresh-faced, with a shock of blond hair. Triver had the bulk and muscular equipment of a heavyweight bodyguard. Leaving the breakfast tray, he took the binoculars from Covey and focused them.

'Know him?' Covey asked.

Triver, a man of few words, shook his head.

Covey's voice betrayed his doubts. 'I suppose he's only another poolside Romeo?'

Triver adjusted the glasses to a sharper focus. 'Hard to say. Could be.'

Down at the pool Danny was still playing out his line of patter as he tried unsuccessfully to catch a glimpse of Maria's back. "You've got to understand ... To see that face come to life: to see it spring from cold canvas to warm, vibrant life... it's a kind of miracle.'

Although she was now enjoying Danny's outrageous approach, the girl remained cool and composed. Danny leaned forward eagerly.

'Tell me your name.'

The word slipped out before the girl could check herself. 'Maria.' As she bit her lip in annoyance, Danny's expression turned dreamlike.

'Maria . . . Maria . . . Maria . . . It's like a thousand violins. Say it again for me.'

'Excuse me, but is this man annoying you?' The sudden question made both of them turn. Brett, looking solicitous, was leaning over the girl, an arm extended towards Danny.

She gazed up at him with interest. 'Is he a friend of yours?'

Brett slid smoothly into a chair at the opposite side of the American. His voice was grave although his eyes were twinkling with humour. 'Hardly a friend. I'm his psychiatrist. And if he is troubling you...'

Danny gave him a beady stare. 'Now look, pal. Do you have to keep on bothering me?'

Brett gave a resigned shrug. 'Persecution mania, I'm afraid. Normally I keep him under sedation but on days like this it seems cruel to keep him indoors. The trouble is, if I leave him for a moment this always happens. Has he been talking about a girl's painting in Parolini?'

A dimple showed in the girl's cheek. 'Yes.'

Brett nodded. 'That's where it happened. A falling brick hit him on the head. The picture was the last thing he saw and so he's been obsessed by it ever since.'

Flattered by the attention of the two attractive men, Maria was unable to

contain her amusement any longer. As she burst out laughing, Danny and Brett exchanged delighted glances. Brett leaned forward.

'I suggest a drive in the mountains and lunch at an auberge. It's too hot and crowded down here.'

Danny gave a snort of contempt. 'I said you'd no razzmatazz. She wants to live, don't you, honey? Let's go water-skiing. Then we'll have lunch at the Empress.'

She stared at one and then the other with mock innocence. 'But you can't separate. Not if you are doctor and patient.'

'I could drop him off at the hospital,' Brett suggested.

'Oh, no; I wouldn't let you do that. Not for my sake. Couldn't the three of us? ...'

Brett sighed. 'I suppose we could take him along. He might come in handy for carrying things.'

Before Danny could hit back, the girl rose and prepared to leave. Both men tried to position themselves but the beach robe she shrugged on denied them a glimpse of her back. Giving her attractive smile she moved away. 'Please give me five minutes to change.'

"We'll meet you at the hotel entrance,' Danny said. As the girl walked away he turned anxiously towards Brett. 'Did you get a look?'

Brett shook his head. Danny followed his eyes and gave an exclamation. The girl's open-topped beach bag stood beside her vacant chair, with a hotel key and tag visible inside it The American was about to drop his hand inside the bag when Maria's voice made him start guiltily.

'I had to come back,' she explained. 'I left my bag behind.'

As one, both men moved behind her. As the girl bent forward to pick up the bag, her short beach jacket rode up and revealed a small, heart-shaped birthmark just above her bikini. Danny clapped Brett on the shoulder as the girl gave them another smile and hurried back to her hotel.

'Her real name now, and we're high and dry.'

Brett nodded. 'If we could get her door key, we could search her room.'

Danny, brimful of confidence now, waved a hand for Brett to precede him to the hotel. 'From now on it's going to be easy. Like taking candy from a baby.'

From the window above, Covey was keeping them under surveillance. Two of them now,' he muttered.

*You don't know either of them?' Triver asked.

'No. But they've both got money - you can tell it by their clothes.' As he spoke Covey saw Danny clap Brett on the shoulder as the girl walked away. 'I don't like it. They're too friendly with one another to be poolside Romeos. You'd better check them both out.'

Taking the binoculars, Triver took careful note of both men before heaving his muscular bulk from his chair. 'OK. I'll start right away.'

Seated at the desk in his villa, Judge Fulton was examining the contents of a file. Glancing up at the man opposite him, he nodded his approval. "Yes; it is a masterpiece of deception. Plenty of detailed information about Maria, and some manufactured evidence linking Wilde and Sinclair with me.'

He passed the file across the desk. Flavel, soberly dressed, greying, worried-faced, flicked briefly through it.

'Plant it in Wilde's room,' the judge told him. 'Where they can find it without too much difficulty.'

Flavel leaned uneasily back in his chair. 'You do realize, maitre, that if my superiors ever find out I am helping you, I shall be drummed out of the Force.'

'I appreciate very much what you are doing, Inspector Flavel. But you must admit it is in a good cause.'

Flavel's voice expressed his disquiet. 'That depends, maitre. If you are right, perhaps. If you are wrong, no. And I still believe you are wrong.'

'That is something we should know very soon.'

Sighing, Flavel rose, the dossier in his hand. 'Supposing you are right. You do realize you will be putting these two young men in very grave danger? Without them having any hint of it.'

The judge swung sharply away. 'I am well aware of that, Inspector. But on balance isn't it a risk worth taking? If they are half the men I believe riiey are, they should be able to take care of themselves.'

Flavel went to the door, turned. 'For their sakes, I hope so,' he said dryly. When the frowning judge behind the desk did not answer, he gave a salute and left the study,

CHAPTER FOUR

The garden restaurant of the Empress was gay with talk and laughter. Danny and Brett, with Maria between them, were seated at one side of a table facing a group of guitarists. The girl, attractively dressed in a cool flowered frock, was laughing as Brett told her a French story that called for a good deal of gesticulating with a wine glass. Danny, grinning as if he also was enjoying the joke, was leaning imperceptibly sideways. He had noticed the girl's handbag was resting between her chair and his own, and his hand was creeping down towards it.

A middle-aged French couple at an adjacent table were watching Brett's antics with amusement. Conscious he was in their range of vision, Danny was inhibited in his movements. His hand, stealing down alongside Maria's long, tanned legs, had to grope blindly for the bag. Unable to find it, his hand closed on something round and furry. It was the head of the French couple's poodle that had crept beneath the table to escape the sunlight. Petulant with the heat, the poodle gave a snap and Danny a loud yell. As he leapt to his feet,

wringing his hand, Brett burst out laughing. His face straightening, he patted the startled girl's hand. 'Serve him right for trying, darling,' he said, avoiding Danny's glare. 'I told you these Americans are all the same.'

The site for the *boule* game was picturesque, a copse of gum trees giving shelter from the early afternoon sun. Forty yards away the palm-studded esplanade led down to the crowded beach and the blue Mediterranean. Brett's ball, falling with a tiny splash of dust near the *cochonnet,* brought a murmur of appreciation from the spectators. Smiling, Brett turned to Maria. Tour turn.'

Nodding, she lowered her handbag to the ground. Danny, as if intent on her throw, crouchecf down at her feet. Concentrating hard, the girl lobbed her ball forward. Taking advantage of her absorption Danny fumbled with the catch of her handbag and slipped his hand inside. As the spectators gave a sympathetic murmur at Maria's throw, an instinct he was being watched made Danny freeze. Turning his face upwards, he saw a uniformed gendarme standing over him, his eyes fixed grimly on the handbag in which Danny's hand was still hidden. With forced nonchalance Danny rose to his feet and handed the handbag to Maria.

'You seen my cigarette lighter, honey? I can't find it anywhere.'

Seeing his predicament, Brett grinned and reached into his pocket. 'Don't worry. I've got it here.'

Danny showed his relief. With a sickly smile at the gendarme he sidled past him and took the lighter from Brett. Seeing the Englishman's expression Danny breathed low and hard. 'What's the matter with you? I'm taking all the risks and you're just playing pansy-boy.'

'I shouldn't worry,' Brett murmured back. Tfou're providing us with plenty of laughs.'

The scent of blossoms in the flowermarket was intoxicating. Maria gave a gasp of pleasure. 'No more, Brett, please. I cannot carry them.'

'Nonsense,' Brett said He turned to the smiling woman at the stall. 'Give me three dozen more carnations, madame. Those red ones.'

'Oui, m'sieur. With pleasure.'

Maria, her arms already full of blossoms, turned with a laugh to Danny. Her handbag was dangling from the tips of her fingers. 'Please take my bag, Danny. Or I am sure to drop it.'

A cat confronted with a bucketful of cream could not have looked more surprised or gratified than Danny at that moment. With the handbag over his arm, he moved a few paces away while Brett loaded the laughing girl with more flowers. As he was about to open the bag he saw a slim, foppishly-dressed young man watching him from a stall opposite. As their eyes met, the young man smiled. Danny's gaze moved to the handbag and back again before the penny dropped. Panicking, covered in humiliation, he hurried back to Maria and hastily slotted the strap of the handbag into her fingers. With Brett's

laugh adding to his discomfort Danny growled and pushed his way out of the market to his car.

Five minutes later he drove Maria back to her hotel. As he and Brett tried to follow the girl from the car, she checked them. 'No, please. Thank you for a lovely day. I'll see you both at eight.'

Their two tanned faces stared up at her. 'Then we'll call for you,' Danny said.

'No. I'd rather meet you inside the restaurant.'

'Are you sure?' Brett asked.

The girl nodded. With a last smile at them, her arms full of flowers, she ran happily into the hotel. They watched her until she disappeared, then Danny turned with some shame to Brett. 'You know something? I didn't get it.'

Brett pretended not to understand. 'Didn't get what?'

The key, lunkhead. To her room.'

Very casually Brett reached into the top pocket of his jacket. TTou mean this?'

Danny stared at the key with its attached label resting in the Englishman's palm. 'When?' he asked hoarsely. 'Just tell me when.'

'Just after we started out for lunch. While you were driving.'

Danny glowered at him. 'And all day you've let me . . . You know something? I ought to shoot you. Right between the eyes.'

With the mass of flowers in her arms, Maria was having difficulty in opening her handbag. As she struggled with its catch, the door of her room opened and Covey stood in the doorway.

'Come in,' he said quietly. "We've been waiting for you.' Although the girl showed anger at his intrusion, it was plain she knew Covey as she stepped inside. 'What do you want?' she asked, crossing to a table where she laid down the flowers.

Triver, settled comfortably in an armchair, gave her a nod which she ignored as she swung round on Covey. He closed the door before answering. His attitude was calm and reasoning.

'I've come about those two men, Maria. You're not to see them again.'

Her dark eyes flashed angrily. 'Why not?'

Covey sighed. You'll have to take my word why not. You mustn't see them again.'

"But I am going to see them. I am having dinner with them tonight.' As Covey shook his head, her voice rose angrily: 'Every time I meet someone I like, you stop me seeing them. Well, this time it's different. I am not going to let you spoil things for me again.'

Covey's voice remained patient. 'I've only stopped you seeing the ones that could be dangerous, Maria. Please try to see it our way - it's our job.'

The girl swung round towards the window. The tears in her eyes came from both frustration and anger. 'Why should I care about your job? For once I'm

enjoying myself and you're not going to spoil it for me.'

Covey walked across to a small table on which a transistor radio was standing. 'So you believe those two had no motive for squiring you around like that? And for spending so much money on you?'

The girl turned sharply. 'Why should they have a motive?'

Shaking his head sadly, Covey picked something up from the table and held it out to the girl. It was the file that Judge Fulton had given to Flavel. 'I'm sorry but we found this in the American's room.'

Looking bewildered, Maria took the file from him. Seeing her dismay as she flipped over the pages, Covey nodded. You see I Chapter and verse on you. Everything you've done since you were six years old. I don't know if they're the Law or the Press, but either way it's obvious you mustn't see them again.'

The girl turned over a few more pages, then suddenly flung the file across the room. As she began to cry softly, Covey laid a hand on her slim shoulder.

'I'm sorry, Maria. This time it's bad. So bad I'm taking you out of town.'

She started. 'Where?'

'I can't tell you yet. But there's someone I want you to meet.'

The girl's tear-stained face turned to him. 'Do I have a choice?'

Covey sighed. 'I'm afraid you don't. Better pack a bag. Don't worry about your clothes. We'll bring them along later.'

The girl packed a small grip and took a coat from her wardrobe. As Covey took her arm and led her to the door, she paused alongside the telephone. 'I'd like to tell them I won't be meeting them tonight. Can't I do that?'

Covey opened the door and led her outside. 'Don't worry. Triver will see to it.' He gazed back into the room, his face expressionless. 'You'll let them know Maria's not coming, won't you?'

Unseen by the girl, Triver gave him a grim wink and nodded. 'Just leave everything to me,' he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The door into the restaurant was locked. A handwritten notice, resting on a chair that blocked the way, read: 'Closed for Repairs'. Inside the restaurant two French workmen were adding the last touches by screwing a mirror into place behind the bar. Lined up against the opposite wall, the serving staff, immaculate in their white tuxedos, watched and waited.

Bruno, as neat and dapper as a penguin, had his eyes fixed on a clock above the bar which read ten minutes to eight. Walking agitatedly forward he spoke to the workmen. One of them, wearing denims and a formidable moustache, grunted impatiently and waved him away. Dabbing his forehead with a white handkerchief, Bruno retreated back to his world of wealth and privilege. Each time the hour hand of the electric clock jerked forward he perceptibly winced.

It was two minutes to eight before the moustached workman growled something and his younger companion began collecting up their tools. Rushing forward, Bruno unlocked the door, dragged in the chair, and with relish tore up the 'Closed for Repairs' notice. As the two workmen disappeared, he stood back to take stock of the bar. No trace of its previous damage showed: once again it was all crystal elegance.

Beaming his satisfaction, Bruno was about to address his staff when footsteps sounded outside. Adjusting his bow-tie, he moved forward unctuously to greet his first guests of the evening. As the door swung open he started to bow, then gave a gasp of dismay. Danny and Brett were framed in the doorway.

Smiling, Brett approached him. 'Good evening, Bruno. A table for three, please.'

The man made a violent Gallic gesture of protest. 'Impossible, monsieur. We are full tonight.'

Both Brett and Danny stared at the empty restaurant. Tull?' Danny asked.

For a moment it seemed as if the frantic Bruno would sink to his knees in supplication. 'Please, messieurs. There are restaurants as good as this all over Nice. Some with far better cuisine. Why do you not go to one more worthy of your tastes?'

"You're too modest, Bruno,' Brett said.

'Monsieur, I beg you. Ten skilled workmen have laboured unceasingly to restore this room ...'

'And a fine job they've done,' Danny said admiringly. He glanced at Brett. 'Don't you think so, pal?'

'Pal?' Bruno stared at them. 'Does that mean your differences are setded?'

Brett nodded. 'Our relationship is one of complete accord and harmony.'

'Right,' Danny said.

"Then I have your word you will not fight one another?'

'Absolutely.'

'Definitely.'

A heartfelt smile of relief crossed Bruno's face. 'In that case, messieurs, it will be my great pleasure to serve you.'

He led them to a table and assisted them into their chairs. Brett motioned him closer. 'Some time in the middle of dinner I'd like you to call me away to the telephone. Make it sound urgent. You understand?'

'But naturally, monsieur. Do you wish to order now or later?'

'Later. When the lady arrives.'

Bruno bowed, gave them a last glance, and hurried away. Danny grinned. 'He's not over-confident, is he?'

'Would you be?' Brett slipped a hand into his pocket and produced Maria's room key. 'Are you sure you know what to do?'

'Of course I'm sure. I keep her talking while you search her room.' Danny grinned again. 'No need to hurry back, pal. I can always tell her a rich aunt has

been taken ill.'

Brett raised an eyebrow. 'And risk the poor girl being bored to death? I'm taking chances as it is.'

About to answer quip with quip, Danny felt his foot kicked under the table and heard Brett's warning whisper.

Turn slowly and look what's coming through the door.'

Four men had entered the restaurant. Although they were wearing well-cut, dark suits, their heavy build and bearing suggested they were far from being guests for dinner. Triver was leading them, and on seeing Brett and Danny he motioned the others to fan out. A waiter, trying to divert them to another table, was pushed unceremoniously aside. Grabbing chairs from a nearby table, *the* three heavies sat down in an arc behind Danny. Triver remained standing. When none of them spoke, Brett gave Danny an amused glance. 'Friends of yours?'

'Sure,' Danny grinned. 'Gorillas take to me.'

Tm not surprised. You've a lot in common.'

Triver gave them both a look and moved forward. *Maria won't be coming tonight. Understand?'

Danny ignored him. 'I'm disappointed. They're only messenger boys.'

Brett leaned back and began fishing in his pockets. Then I suppose we'd better give them a tip.'

The heavies exchanged glances. One rubbed his knuckles in anticipation. Across the room Bruno was watching the scene with horrified fascination. Triver's voice did not rise. 'I've also got some advice for you both. Get out of town. Right away.'

At this Danny gave a start and gazed up at him admiringly. 'Hey, that's a marvellous line. You know something? You'd be great in a western movie.'

Triver's expression was beginning to tighten. 'There's something else. Don't see Maria again. Don't ever see her.'

Brett leaned across the table. 'He's trying to tell us something. If only he'd speak King's English.'

The American grinned. 'I thought he was doing well for a gorilla.'

Triver, hard-eyed, stared down at him. 'All right. If you won't be told, then you'll have to be shown.' His eyes shifted to the heavies. 'Take him first 1'

It was the sign for all hell to break loose. As two of the heavies leapt up and tried to grab Danny's arms, Brett came out of his chair like a stone from a catapult and knocked one of them cold with a tremendous punch. At the same time Danny swivelled round and landed a punch to Triver's stomach that doubled him up and sent him crashing into a table. At the far end of the restaurant Bruno forgot the telephone as chairs splintered and tables overturned to the crash of wine glasses. Two middle-aged men, entering the restaurant with their womenfolk, gazed at the brawl in horror and dragged their wives back through the door.

Danny and Brett were fighting back to back. Although outnumbered three

to two, they were proving themselves a formidable team. As Triver and one of his heavies, an ex-pugilist named Gallard, moved in on Brett, the Englishman caught Triver's arm and jerked him forward. As he reeled into Danny, the American instinctively brought back his elbow, doubling Triver up again. Ducking a punch from Gallard, Brett landed an uppercut that stretched Triver out alongside his first victim.

With the odds equal, the fight now split up into two separate engagements. The surviving heavies, Gallard and a beetle-browed character named Marac, were tough and durable and neither Brett nor Danny was having it all his own way. A chair, swung horizontally, sent Danny skidding across the floor towards Bruno who, lips moving silently in prayer, had drawn as near to the fight as he dared. Grinning apologetically at him, Danny picked himself up and dived back into the fight. Duadng another chair, he grabbed Marac's legs and brought him down. The two men rolled over and over across the polished floor, leaving a trail of devastation behind them. At the buffet table, Danny man aged to catch Marac with a solid punch to the jaw. As the dazed heavy tried to rise, Danny caught him again. The man pitched against the wall and slid down it, out cold.

Breathing heavily and feeling his jaw, Danny turned. Among the overturned tables Brett and Gallard were slugging it out toe to toe. The ex-pugilist was the most formidable of the four assailants, and Danny could see Brett was having difficulty with him. Grinning, he moved nearer.

You know your trouble? You're not getting enough weight behind your punches.'

Gasping as he received a blow to the body, Brett slammed one in himself. 'How was that?'

Danny drew even closer. 'Still too light. You're not following through. Want me to show you?'

Before Brett could answer, Gallard spun round and swung a heavy punch at the American. Danny pitched over a broken table and sat staring dazedly at the two men. 'Hey, that's dirty. One against two.'

The two men were exchanging blows again. Brett feinted, brought down Gallard's guard, and then brought over his right hand. The ex-pugilist stopped dead in his tracks. Seeing his opportunity, Brett moved in fast. Two more punches, one to the body and the second to the jaw, and Gallard toppled over like a felled redwood.

Rubbing his knuckles, Brett walked over and lifted Danny from the floor. 'Shall we go?'

The American grinned at the wreckage and the four prostrate bodies. 'Maybe we'd better.'

On their way to the door they passed Bruno. As they met his silent reproachful glance, Danny paused. You can't say we started it this time,' he said defensively.

Bruno lifted his lugubrious eyes to the ceiling. 'My restaurant, messieurs.

"What shall I do?'

The two men stared at one another. Then, as Brett began to speak, the American checked him. 'Oh, no. Not this time.' He turned to the despondent Bruno. This one's on me. Put it on my account. OK?'

Leaving the restored Bruno writing another 'Closed for Repairs' sign, the two men went upstairs to Maria's room-As Brett tapped on the door, Danny stood alongside him casting nervous glances left and right,

'Maria.' Brett's call although soft, seemed to echo down the deserted corridor.

'Hurry it up, will you?' Danny hissed. 'Someone'll be along here in a minute.'

Brett inserted the key and the two men stepped furtively into the room. As Danny hastily closed the door and switched on the light, Brett grinned mockingly.

'Axe you always as nervous as this when you enter a lady's bedroom?'

Danny, whose head was aching from the fight, sounded disenchanted, *Look, man - we've already got ninety days hanging over us. I don't want it to be six months.'

Brett shrugged. Then let's start searching.'

Danny went over to a dressing-table and Brett to a large cupboard. As he pulled open the door, Brett glanced over his shoulder. 'I wonder what's happened to Maria. She might be able to tell us something about those beefy boyfriends of hers.'

Danny was rummaging in one of the drawers of the dressing-table. 'As far as I'm concerned it can remain one of life's mysteries. Let's find her real name and get out of here.'

Brett hauled a beautiful nightdress from the cupboard and held it up appreciatively. 'Pretty?' he asked.

'Charming,' Danny grunted. 'I'll buy you one.' Pulling open the second drawer of the dressing-table, he paused as his hand encountered a document wallet. He began unzipping it. 'Come here. I've got something.'

Brett joined him as he slid the contents of the wallet out on a table. A passport appeared and Danny snatched it up. As he opened it, both men stared at a photograph of Maria. Beneath it, Danny read her name: TVlichelle Annette Du-pont.' His mood changed into one of elation. "That's it. The heart-shaped birthmark and now her real name. We're free men again, pal.'

"We're not free men until we've seen the judge,' Brett reminded him. 'So let's see how fast you can get us to the villa.'

Restoring the room to its former condition, the two men went to the door and listened. Footsteps made both of them draw back but to their relief they went past the room. Brett opened the door a few inches, waited a moment, then gave Danny the all clear. Closing the door behind them, they ran for the lift.

Unknown to them, their recent opponents were licking their wounds behind

a closed door down the opposite corridor. Triver was bending over a telephone while he dabbed his mouth with a damp towel. Marac was bathing his face in the wash-basin, and Gallard was stretching plaster across the third heavy's split eyebrow.

Triver's expression as he listened to the angry voice on the telephone told its own story. 'All right,' he muttered. 'So we blew it. What do you want done now?'

The voice dropped a full tone. Triver's expression made the three heavies turn towards him. Tou mean it?' he asked eagerly. 'Fulton? OKI. But what about these other two jokers?'

The watching men saw his face tighten in anticipation as he listened. 'If that's the way you want it, why not? No one here's going to argue.'

Replacing the receiver, he threw away the towel and walked over to a suitcase. A badly-swollen lip gave him an ugly appearance as he pulled out a revolver and a box of shells. His eyes lifted to the watching men as he fed the shells into the revolver. Tou can stop worrying about your bruises. We're going to take care of them the best way possible - at the old man's villa. Gallard; you come with me in the Renault. Marac and Vevrey - you follow in the shooting brake.'

Slipping the revolver into his pocket he went to the door. As the three men grabbed their jackets, he turned. 'This has to be a permanent job. So don't anyone slip up.'

CHAPTER SIX

Judge Fulton nodded his satisfaction. 'So you both spent the entire day with her. Excellent. Excellent.'

Danny deep in a comfortable armchair and about to light a large cigar, nodded happily. 'That's right. We gave her the full treatment.'

Across the study Brett, who had paused to admire a painting above the desk, added his endorsement. 'She got our undivided attention. Until we were interrupted, that is.'

Fulton leaned forward in his bathchair. 'Interrupted?'

'By four very large men.'

•Where was this?'

'While we were in the restaurant waiting for her to come down to dinner.'

•What happened?'

Danny answered for Brett. There was a bit of a fracas.'

The judge's gaze moved from one to the other. 'Which I assume you won?'

Danny exhaled blue smoke contentedly. 'Of course.'

Fulton gave a sudden chuckle of delight. Rubbing his hands he rose briskly from the bathchair and with no trace of impediment started towards the cocktail cabinet. 'Good, good. This is going splendidly, gentlemen. We really

must celebrate.'

Danny was sitting bolt upright in his armchair. Brett's eyebrows were raised. Realizing what he had done, Fulton paused, then gave a shamefaced laugh as he glanced back at the empty wheelchair.

'You must forgive me, gendemen. The bathchair was here when I rented the chateau. So, when I had you brought here, I found myself using it.'

'Why?' Brett asked.

He received a rueful smile. 'It's a hard question to answer. Perhaps I felt I could handle you better by pretending I was a cripple. Or perhaps it is just that years of court-room technique have given me a flair for the dramatic. I wouldn't worry too much about it.'

Danny had forgotten his cigar. 'Wouldn't worry? This thing gets cookier by the minute.'

Ignoring him, Fulton began pouring out drinks. 'So finally you searched her room. I hope someone saw you.'

Brett and Danny exchanged bewildered glances. 'Sorry,' Brett said, 'but I'm getting out of my depth.'

Tm drowning,' Danny growled. 'Look - we found she has the heart-shaped birthmark and that her real name is Michelle Annette Dupont. Isn't that all you wanted?'

Fulton, dropping ice into the glasses, did not answer. Looking suspicious, Brett drew nearer. Tou're giving me the feeling you're more concerned *how* we handled this affair than what we found out.'

The judge turned. 'You show perception, Lord Sinclair. After all, I've always known Maria's real name was Michelle Dupont.'

Danny gave a gasp. You've known? Then what have you been doing to us?'

Fulton handed them filled glasses before answering. 'It's really very simple, gentlemen. My aim has been to put a red rag before a bull. And I pride myself I have succeeded.'

Brett was watching him closely. *By getting us interested in Maria?'

'To begin with, yes. But I wanted the red rag to be very red indeed. So I have taken the liberty of planting information that makes the two of you look extremely dangerous to the men I'm after.'

'Dangerous?' Danny asked grimly.

Tes. I regret the necessity but I know that when you hear my reasons you'll...'

Danny was on his feet. *We had a deal. Remember?'

'A little matter of evading ninety days if we investigated Maria,' Brett said.

The judge waved a hand. 'Don't worry about that. That is all settled. Forgiven and forgotten.'

Danny glanced at Brett and both men moved as one towards the french windows. 'Then that's it. All square. We're out. Right, pal?'

'Right,'Brett said.

Fulton stepped anxiously forward, his hands outstretched. "Wait, please.

When you give me a chance to explain it will be different . . .'

•We're off,' Danny said grimly, fumbling with the catch.

Brett gave the dismayed judge a half-apologetic smile. "What he means is he doesn't fancy being a red rag to a wild bull. I can't say I do either.'

'But, gentlemen . . .'

Danny was tugging at the door handle. 'Judge, you can talk all night but there's nothing in the world can keep me here another ten seconds. Unless these doors won't . . .'

A sudden, tremendous crash drowned his voice. Shattered glass showered over both men. As more pistol shots blasted into the room, Danny threw himself at Brett and both men hugged the wall. Seeing the elderly judge was still on his feet, dazed by the sudden attack, Brett dived at him and brought him down to the carpet. For a moment all three men froze as glass shattered and bullets ricocheted round the room. Conscious they were sitting targets if the gunmen came any closer, Brett was crawling for the light switches when Danny's urgent whisper told him the American had the same thought.

"English, you're nearest. Can you douse the lights?'

A fusillade of shots shattered the bottles on the table and drenched Brett with gin and whisky. Behind him he heard Fulton's startled voice.

'I never believed they would go this far.'

Hugging the wall alongside the french windows, Danny was gritting his frustration. *We need a gun. Don't you have one?'

Fulton raised an arm. "There's one in my desk. The middle left-hand drawer.'

Danny was watching Brett, who had reached the wall beneath the side door. As he leapt up and clicked the switches that plunged the study into darkness, Danny dived across the room to the desk. Outside there was a shout and two more shots ripped into the darkened room. Waiting, Danny raised his arm and felt inside the middle drawer. His fingers touched something cold and he gave a grunt of satisfaction as he pulled out a large Navy revolver. Checking it was loaded, he crawled back to the french windows. As he heard footsteps on the gravel outside he jumped forward and fired three shots in quick succession. A second later there was a gasp and a cry of pain. As he fired again, Danny discovered Brett was standing alongside him. The Englishman's voice was ice-cool. 'Ready to go?'

Danny nodded. Grabbing both handles of the shattered french windows Brett pulled them open and both men burst out on to the gravel terrace. In the starlight they could see the shapes of two cars drawn up on the drive thirty yards away. A man's shout reached them. 'Marac's been hit. Get out of here.'

As his eyes became accustomed to the starlight, Danny saw two men were already climbing into the front car while two others, one limping, were making for a station-wagon. As one of them turned and raised an arm, he and Brett took cover behind a large stone flower-jar. Ignoring the bullet that whined off the jar, Danny took careful aim at the station-wagon. The crash of

the heavy Navy revolver was followed by a crack almost as loud, as the rear tyre of the wagon burst. With a shout of warning, the two men turned for the first car which was already moving up the drive. As they tumbled into it, Danny stood up and took aim but the hammer of the revolver fell with a click on an empty chamber.

Breathing hard the two men stood listening to the receding sound of the car as it screamed down the road. Glancing at one another, they went back into the study. Brett's voice was curt. They've gone. You can switch the lights on.'

Fulton, pale from shock, clicked down the switches and stood surveying the damage. Danny tossed the revolver on a chair. He looked hard and resentful.

'I think it's explanation time, don't you? And you need a good one. Why did you set us up like this?'

Fulton poured himself a drink, nodded at the other two to help themselves, and sank shakily into a chair. 'You're right. You deserve the truth. Have you ever heard the name Robert Dupont?'

Brett, who was picking through the surviving bottles, frowned and turned. 'Dupont is Maria's real name.'

'Correct. Robert was her brother.'

Danny gave a sharp exclamation as the name struck a chord. 'Robert Dupont! *The* Robert Dupont?'

'The same one,' Fulton told him.

“But he's dead. He was shot three years ago.’

Brett was staring at them both with irritation. 'Will someone please enlighten me? I've never heard the name before.'

Danny turned to him. 'Dupont was the boss man of the rackets. He ran the whole of the Mediterranean crime syndicate. He was a fink. A top hood.'

'A wholly evil man,' Fulton added. 'Far worse than an animal.'

Danny glanced back. 'But he's dead.'

*His body was never found,' the judge said quietly.

'So what? The evidence was overwhelming.'

'It was also circumstantial. Moreover, after his death, everyone expected the usual battle for power: the shoot-ups, the killings, the gang warfare. Only it never happened. The whole corrupt organization went on working as smoothly as silk.'

'OK. That's easy to explain. Another hood took over.'

'In my wide experience of crime, Mr Wilde, crime dictators are as difficult to replace as political dictators. The edifice they have created is too brittle, too dependent on their own brand of egotism and ruthlessness. When they die, their organization dies with them.'

'But it's possible,' Danny insisted. 'He could have had a lieutenant who knew all his tricks and was able to slide straight into the driving seat.'

Fulton shook his head. 'I won't even admit it is possible. A new gang-leader, like a new dictator, would show the change in his different methods. In a hundred subtle and unsubtle ways.'

Brett, showing interest in the argument, had drawn closer to them. 'And everything is the same?'

The judge's pale, earnest face turned towards him. *Every crime committed in these parts carries Dupont's hallmark. In spite of what the police and the Press believe, I am certain he is still alive.'

The smell of wine gave the room a musty but not unpleasant odour. Tapped barrels lined the walls. Wine glasses of all shapes and sizes, on display in cabinets, reflected the light of a huge oil lamp. Leather-bound volumes on winemaking filled a bookcase. A large polished table, on which a set of crystal glasses were standing, stood in the centre of the room. Covey, seated at the table, had drawn one of the glasses towards him and was rubbing his wet fingers around the rim. The whining whistle the act produced appeared to please him and he reached out for a larger glass.

Maria, wearing the flowered dress that enhanced rather than concealed her superb figure, was pacing up and down the room. The noise Covey was making was clearly exacerbating her nerves and her voice suddenly shrilled at him.

TTou've been doing that for over ten minutes. For heaven's sake, stop it.'

Shrugging, Covey pushed the two glasses back into the centre of the table. The girl resumed her pacing again, then turned to him sullenly.

"How much longer have we to stay here?'

As if in answer she heard a door handle turning. Wheeling sharply, she saw a man framed in the doorway. Supporting himself with a cane, the man was bearded and wore a pair of dark glasses. With his heavy body supported by the cane giving the impression he had recently suffered a severe illness or accident, his age was difficult to assess. His voice was soft.

'Hello, Michelle.'

At first the girl had shown no recognition. Now, as she heard his voice, her expression turned from shock to wonder. 'Robert?'

As the man nodded, she gave a cry of disbelief. *But it, can't be.'

He smiled and stepped forward. 'As you see, Fm no ghost.'

For a moment her lovely face reflected a dozen conflicting emotions. Then, sobbing, she ran forward and threw her arms around him. 'Robert! But how? ... I don't understand. I thought you were dead.'

He stroked her long black hair. 'I'm sorry. Only I hadn't any choice. I was very ill for a long time. And then I had to give myself a new identity.'

*But why couldn't you have let me know?'

'I wanted to. But it wasn't safe for you to know the truth. Those who weren't convinced I was dead might have tried to get at me through you. That's why Covey here has vetted everybody you saw and talked to.'

'I still think you should have trusted me,' she sobbed.

"Perhaps,' he soothed. 'But what does it matter now? I'm alive, and I have a new face, a new name, and a new background. In fact, I'm almost safe.'

She drew back in alarm. 'Almost?"

He nodded harshly. "By this time everyone's convinced I'm dead but one man. A pig-headed old fooL But don't worry. He is being taken care of tonight.'

Although his eyes were hidden behind his dark glasses, she noticed for the first time the vindictive lines of his mouth. She tried to catch his arm. What do you mean -taken care of?'

He was no longer listening to her. He had waved Covey towards him and the two of them were whispering in the doorway. Her voice rose in alarm. 'Robert I What are you planning to do?'

* * *

Judge Fulton picked up the Navy revolver from the armchair, examined it and moved to the desk. Pulling open a drawer, he began feeding shells into the empty chambers.

'I believed that if I could make it seem I was investigating Maria, sooner or later Dupont would try to stop me. Tonight has proved I was right.'

Danny was looking incredulous. 'And knowing this, you let us get mixed up in it?'

Fulton gave him a rueful smile. 'My hope was that they would make you so angry, you'd want to see the affair through to the end.'

Danny, full of outrage, glanced at Brett. 'I'm angry all right, but not in the way you want. I happen to have a strong instinct of self-preservation. Like count me out.'

The judge turned towards Brett who frowned. 'It's pure madness, trying to take on the underworld on your own. Surely you must see that.'

'What else can I do, Lord Sinclair? I am the only man who believes Dupont is still alive.'

'It's madness just the same. And I agree with Danny -you'd no right to involve us with a gang of murderers without telling us the risks first.'

The judge sighed. You're quite right, and you make me feel very ashamed of myself. Only where else could I turn? No one else believes Dupont is still alive.'

'What are you going to do now?' Brett asked.

To his credit, Fulton showed no self-pity. 'I'll manage somehow. It wouldn't be fair to ask any more of you. I see that now.'

'You're right, it wouldn't,' Danny grunted. 'Come on, pal, or you'll start feeling sorry for him.'

Brett paused at the door and gazed back. 'Goodnight, sir.'

He received a smile. 'Goodnight, gentlemen, and thank you both for what you've done.'

The judge remained standing until their footsteps died down the drive. Then, as their car engine started, he slumped into an armchair, a broken tired old man.

Danny swung the Ferrari on to the road and roared away, his headlights

tearing holes in the darkness. In the dashboard light his face still showed resentment.

*What about that guy? He frames us so we get a police rap, blackmails us to do a snooping job for him, and sets us up like ducks in a shooting gallery for a gang of hoods. And then expects us to take his side in the shoot-out.'

Brett smiled. 'Put that way, it is pretty cooL'

'Cool?' Danny snorted. 'It makes him as cunning as the hoods. So why should we risk our skins for him?'

As the Ferrari raced down the road, neither man noticed the Renault without lights crouched among a clump of trees. Triver and Gallard were in the front seat, the injured Marac and Vevrey in the rear. As the Ferrari went past in a shower of dust and pebbles, Triver nodded at Gallard, who started the engine. As the Ferrari vanished round a corner, Gallard snapped on the headlights and swung the Renault back down the road to the villa.

In the Ferrari the tempers of both men were beginning to cool. His face thoughtful, Brett was staring at the white ribbon of road ahead. 'There's one thing you have to say -the old man's got courage.'

Danny's grunt was non-committaL 'I still say he'd no right to set us up like that.'

'That's true. But he did make himself Dupont's main target, didn't he?' When Danny did not answer, Brett went on: 'Put yourself in his shoes. If you'd known Dupont was alive, you'd have had to take some action against him.'

'Action, maybe. But not by dragging in innocent men.'

'He had to drag somebody in. And we were the ones he chose.'

Danny gave him a suspicious glance. 'What axe you telling me - that it was a compliment?'

'Wasn't it?'

T don't need that kind of compliment. I like breathing too much.'

'So do L For that matter, so does the old man.'

Danny scowled at Brett's reflection in the windscreen. 'No one's going to knock off an old man like that. There wouldn't be any point now we've left him.'

'Dupont won't see it that way. After what's happened he won't feel safe until the old man is dead and buried.'

The Ferrari began slowing as Danny argued with himself.

Two days ago I was a happy guy without a care in the world. Now I'm feeling guilty because I don't take up a screwy old man's fight with a pack of hoods.'

'You have to admit he's got courage.'

'You've just said that. So have plenty of other screwballs.'

'Us against Dupont,' Brett reflected. 'It's quite a thought.'

'Now you're telling me it's a challenge.'

'Isn't it?'

'It might be if we hadn't better things to do,' Danny grunted.

'That's true,' Brett agreed.

There was a short, uneasy silence, followed by Danny's aggressive question. 'What better things have *you* got to do?'

Brett grinned. 'Now that you ask me, I don't know.'

"Neither do I,' Danny grunted, swinging the Ferrari into a tight U-turn. 'Here goes nothing.'

It took them ten minutes to reach the villa again. Their headlights probed the dark trees as they swung into the drive. As they followed it round, the disabled station-wagon appeared. Lying diagonally across the drive, it forced Danny to park the Ferrari. As he cut the engine and the two men jumped out, they heard a cry for help and the sounds of a struggle. Running past the station-wagon and up the drive they were in time to see two men forcing the judge into a car. As they shouted and ran forward, a shot made them dive for cover. A second later the car roared away round the opposite arm of the drive to the road. As Danny turned to run back for the Ferrari Brett caught his arm. 'They've too much of a start. In this darkness they'd only have to cut their lights and we wouldn't have a hope of finding them.'

Danny realized he was right. 'Just a couple of minutes too late. If we hadn't argued...'

Brett cut short his self-recrimination by opening the rear door of the station-wagon. 'Why don't you look through the judge's papers and see if there's anything that might give us a clue to Dupont's hide-out? In the meantime I'll see if there are any clues in here.'

Danny returned ten minutes later, shaking his head at Brett's question. 'I've checked all the papers in his desk and there's nothing. He probably didn't know Dupont's hideout What gives with the wagon?'

Brett's white cuffs were black with dirt. 'From the smell of the sacks and the rubbish on the platform, it seems to come from a vineyard area. That's all I've been able to make of it so far.'

With the headlights of the Ferrari providing light, the two men continued their search. As Brett went on sifting through the rubbish on the platform of the station-wagon, Danny climbed into the front. As he groped beneath the seats, his fingers encountered a screwed-up piece of paper. He unfolded it, then crumpled it again and threw it out on the drive. Brett, straightening up from the platform, noticed it.

'What's that?'

Danny was now searching the pockets beneath the dashboard. 'Nothing. Just a torn wine-bottle label. Without the name.'

Brett picked up the piece of paper and opened it out beneath the Ferrari's headlights. Seeing his reaction, Danny jumped out of the station-wagon. What's special about it?' Brett handed him the label. It contained the drawing of

an imposing chateau. 'It's come off a chateau-bottled wine.

They often have a drawing on their labels.' 'So what? The name's missing.'

'But I recognize it. It's the Chateau Paillard. About a
hundred and fifty kilometres from here.' Danny's excitement died almost immediately. 'They
could have bought the botde. To drink while drey waited to
grab the old man.'

'They could,' Brett agreed. 'On the other hand . ..' Danny finished the sentence for him. 'I know. It's the
only lead we've got. All right, pal. Let's go to the Chateau
Paillard.'

The morning sun was tinting the mountains pink as the Ferrari slid down into the lush valley. The Chateau Paillard was unmistakeable: a proud, turreted stronghold that dominated the peasant cottages scattered among the vineyards. The grounds were enclosed by a high, creeper-covered wall, and soon the Ferrari was nosing quietly around it, searching for an entrance. Seeing an iron gate, Brett touched Danny's arm and the car halted.

The two men jumped out and closed the doors quietly behind them. 'If we're lucky, they'll all be still asleep,' Danny muttered as they made for the gate.

It was locked but neither man had difficulty in scaling ir. Ahead of them the windows of the chateau glittered in the early morning sunlight. The grounds, full of trees, shrubs, and flower-beds, appeared empty, but the two men took no chances. Ducking from tree to tree they reached a sunken flower-garden and jumped down into it. Golden carp shone in the sunlight as they crept alongside a lily-covered pond. At the far end a set of steps ran up to a greenhouse. They climbed up to the greenhouse and paused. The chateau was no more than thirty yards away but an open stretch of lawn lay between them. 'What do you think?' Danny murmured.

Brett stared around but could see no better approach. 'We'll have to run and hope for the best. Ready?'

Danny did not answer. Brett nudged his arm. 'I asked if you were ready.'

The American's rueful words made him stiffen. 'At least you don't need to worry whether your hunch was right.'

‘Why?'

Take a look behind you.'

Brett spun round. Grinning their triumph, Triver, Gallard and Vevrey had stepped from behind the greenhouse. All three were covering them with automatics. Grimacing, Brett lifted his hands.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The cellar door was flung open. For an instant the two men were silhouetted against the light, then they were pitched forward to the flagstones. The heavy door closed with a reverberating crash. As a key rattled, Danny climbed to his feet. His voice was a mixture of humour and malice as he rubbed a bruised

knee.

'I don't go for being pushed around like this. They were lucky I didn't take their guns away and beat their heads together.'

Brett smiled as he sat up. 'What stopped you?'

'Can't you guess? I'm a coward.'

They stared around then. The wine cellar was large and as stoutly built as a dungeon. Barrels of wine, standing on stout shelves, lined the stone walls. The flagstones were littered with sacks, small pieces of timber, and implements concerned with winemaking. The vaulted roof was high and braced by stout beams. The corners and alcoves were shadowy: a small, barred window high up on the outer wall provided the only light.

Danny sighed and dropped on an empty wine barrel. 'It's worse than Alcatraz. What do you think they're going to do with us?'

A familiar voice made them both start. 'I'm afraid it's not likely to be anything trivial.'

Judge Fulton walked out from behind a long rack of wine bottles. Although dust-stained and dishevelled, his concern was clearly more for the two younger men than himself.

This is terrible, gendemen. How can I apologize enough?'

Danny gave him a grin. 'I wouldn't try. It might weaken your case.'

'Add insult to injury,' Brett said, dusting himself down.

•What happened? Were you captured in Nice and brought here?'

Danny shook his head. "English worked out where this place was from a wine-botde label.'

'But why didn't you call in the police? It was madness to come on your own.'

Brett blew a cobweb off his shoulder. 'It was nothing but a guess. We'd have looked the biggest fools in France if I'd been wrong.'

*Better to have looked fools than lose your lives.'

The two younger men exchanged glances. *You think they'll kill us in cold blood?' Danny asked.

'We wouldn't be the first, Mr Wilde. How many men has Dupont murdered for money? Is he likely to draw back now when his very life is at stake?'

Danny scratched his head. 'Keep on cheering me up. How long do you think we've got?'

'Who can say? It depends what Dupont's plans are.'

Brett moved towards the door. 'One way or the other, it seems we'd better get out of here.'

Danny followed him. 'How?'

Brett examined the huge, rusted lock. 'Strong but simple. Double-twist four-lever action. It can be picked easily enough.'

Danny brightened. 'It can?'

'By any qualified locksmith,' Brett added.

'Oh, funny, funny,' Danny growled, pushing him aside and squinting

through the keyhole. Tfou know something? I saw a movie once with a situation like this. The guy had the lock open in about thirty seconds.'

'Is that a fact?'

'It's true. And I can remember how it was done.'

Brett was smiling tolerandy. Puzzled, the judge came alongside him. Squatting in front of the lock, the ebullient Danny was now fully into his part. Snapping his fingers, he extended a peremptory arm behind him. 'Hairpin!'

One of Brett's eyebrows rose. Danny turned, stared up at him, then gave a grin of embarrassment, 'I forgot. In the movie you were a tall blonde with your hair sort of piled up on top and...'

His hands, trying to describe the scene, made a derogatory gesture and he turned back to the door. 'Aw, forget it,' he growled. 'It was a lousy movie anyway.'

Brett's eyebrow was still raised as he turned towards the judge. 'What that remarkable histrionic performance meant was that he would like us to provide him with a bent nail or a piece of wire. Shall we humour him by seeing what we can find?'

In the wine room upstairs, Maria was sitting tensely on the edge of a chair while she listened to a conversation between her brother and Covey. As he talked, the bearded Dupont paced backwards and forwards, his cane tapping on the flagstones. Always a man of high nervous energy, he radiated tension as he snapped questions at Covey.

Tfou're quite certain everything's been covered?'

'Positive. There's nothing to lead the police here.'

"What about the station-wagon Triver left at Fulton's house?'

Covey gave his weary smile. 'I reported it was stolen to the police. They promised to do their best to find it.'

Dupont gave him an approving look over his dark glasses. 'That's very good. What about the hotel? You left nothing ^criminating there?'

'Nothing.'

'And old Fulton's place?'

TVe both wore gloves.'

The Renault wasn't seen entering or leaving?'

'Not a chance. It's a quiet road. But just in case I've had the number plates changed.'

Dupont took another turn of the room, then nodded his approval. 'All right: that seems safe enough.' His eyes, meeting Covey's, transmitted a silent message. 'Now you'd better go and see how Triver's getting on with his preparations.'

As Covey left the room, Dupont crossed over to Maria and laid a hand on her shoulder. Although the flinch she gave was instantly suppressed it was not lost on Dupont, but he gave no visual sign of it

'Are you very disappointed in me, Michelle?'

"What do you expect?' she muttered.

Tell me what to expect,' he said, watching her.

'After they said you were dead, after all those things they printed about you in the newspapers, I still found it hard to believe. I lost all my friends defending you.'

'Good, Michelle. That's the way it should be between brother and sister. Then why change now?'

There was sudden passion in her voice. 'Because now I see you as you really are. A gangster. Someone who'll stop at nothing to make money.'

'Who are you to sneer at money, Michelle? Hasn't it brought you everything you've ever wanted? Clothes, expensive cars, luxurious hotels. Don't tell me you haven't enjoyed those things? If you are sensible you can go on enjoying them in the future.'

She jumped to her feet. 'No. I want no part of them now. Not when I see what the price is, I'm going away — back to Nice.'

His hand tightened on her shoulder. 'Are you?' he asked softly. How?'

Her face turned pale. T want someone to drive me back.'

'And supposing I have no one to spare?'

'Then I'll phone for a taxi,' she said defiantly. As he released his grip, she turned towards the telephone that rested on the desk. His low murmur checked her.

'Michelle. Just a moment.'

She turned back. Smiling, he drew closer as if to embrace her. Instead, with the speed of a snake, the back of his hand smashed into her face. With a cry she stumbled back against the desk and stared at him with shocked eyes. Stepping forward, he gripped her wrists. Although his voice did not rise by as much as a semitone, the threat it contained held her paralysed.

'There's something you must understand, Michelle. Now you know about me, you are one of us. You'll stay with me and you'll do as I say. Because if you don't...'

"You'd kill me?' she breathed.

Without answering, he walked over to the desk and pulled open a drawer. The white-faced girl watched him pull out two automatics, examine them, and drop one back. The other he opened, checked its clip, and snapped closed. Maria shrank back as he turned to her.

'Do as you're told and you've nothing to fear. But double-cross me . . .' He paused and slipped the automatic into his pocket. 'Try to understand, Michelle. I'm in too deep for anything or anyone to stop me now. Even my sister.'

The girl looked frightened and cowed. At the far end of the room a door opened and Covey appeared. At Dupont's inquiring glance, he nodded. The gang leader turned to the girl

'I won't be more than a few minutes. While I'm gone you stay in this room. You understand?'

As he started towards Covey she realized what he was about to do, and

although now terrified of him, she ran across the room. 'No, Robert. You can't I It's cold-blooded murder.'

Cursing, he swung round and flung her brutally away. 'Didn't I tell you not to interfere?'

She stumbled and fell heavily. Staring down at her through his dark glasses, he laid his cane deliberately on her cheek and then raised it above his head. Terrified, she buried her face in her arms. 'I'm sorry/ she sobbed. 'Please don't hit me.'

He gazed down at her a moment more, then went to the door. Nodding at Covey he disappeared. The man followed him and the girl heard the key being turned in the lock.

She lifted her tear-stained face. The telephone on the desk caught her eye. It must be a trick, she told herself. If she picked up the receiver someone would hear her and call Robert back. And then he would know she was his enemy and shoot her. Of that she no longer had any doubt.

On the other hand, was it possible he never imagined his sister would go so far as to betray him? Was that his weakness - his faith in the loyalty of those of his own blood?

She decided the risk was too great to take as she dropped into a chair. She had done her best to prevent the murder - her conscience was clear. Yet, although she closed her eyes tighter, she could still see the accusing telephone on the desk. In a desperate effort to destroy the vision she buried her face deep in a cushion.

Down in the gloom of the cellar Danny was kneeling before the door, trying to force the lock with a bent nail Brett was watching him with wry amusement.

You do realize you're wasting your time?'

Danny scowled. 'At least I'm doing something. When you get a better idea, let me know.'

Fulton sighed and sank down on a wine cask. 'I can't see any chance of escaping from here. It's as strong as a prison cell'

Brett turned to him, his voice curious. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you. What were your motives for ferreting out Dupont like this? Was it personal? Or was there a deeper reason?'

The judge fumbled wearily in his crumpled jacket. He pulled out a cigar, discovered it was broken and threw it disappointedly away. 'My reason, Lord Sinclair? Dissatisfaction. For thirty years I sat on a High Court bench. Every day men were brought in front of me accused of serious offences. Some were innocent but a great many more were guilty. I did my best to sort out one from the other, but invariably some of the guilty ones escaped. Sometimes because of a flaw in the police evidence: sometimes because of the cleverness of the defence lawyers.' He gave Brett a weary smile. 'One of the anomalies of our legal system is that by providing powerful safeguards for the innocent, we

often leave loopholes for the guilty. I saw many guilty men go free. Men like Dupont. Because, unfortunately, the more successful the criminal, the more money he has to provide himself with false alibis and corrupt lawyers. While I was on the bench, bound by the strict letter of the law, I could do nothing about this, but when I retired I decided in my small way to try to redress the anomaly.'

Brett's expression betrayed his fascination. You're saying you've set yourself up as a private dispenser of justice?'

He received a wry grimace. 'That makes me sound something of a megalomaniac. Don't forget I am not judging these men. Their guilt has already been established to the satisfaction of any reasonable man: it simply cannot be presented in terms that will satisfy the high demands of the courts. So these men have gone free and continue to rob, debase, and sometimes kill their fellow men. After I retired, my conscience would not allow me to sit back and let this happen. You see, retirement gives a man time to think and reflect. Perhaps to find a loophole that has been overlooked.' The judge paused apologetically. 'What are you thinking? That I'm a cranky old man?'

Brett shook his head emphatically. 'Anything but. I find it admirable. Only how could you hope to do it on your own?'

'I realized the impossibility when I made Dupont my target. That's when I had the idea of bringing you two into it, It was wrong and presumptious of me, I know, but I couldn't help feeling that two men of your talents were wasting their lives. Now,' and the judge's eyes moved regretfully round the shadowy cellar, 'I wish with all my heart I hadn't taken such liberties.'

A sharp exclamation from Danny interrupted them. 'I've done it I'

Brett ran forward. 'You've picked the lock?'

Danny was sucking his finger. 'No. I've broken my fingernail.'

'There's only one way of getting out of here/ Brett told him. 'And that's when they open that door.'

Danny turned, dripping sarcasm. 'You've worked that out? All by yourself?' All by myself.'

What about their guns? Do we just hold out our hands and take them?'

'No. Somehow I think they might refuse.'

'So we jump them. Just like that.'

'No; that won't work either. They've seen movies too, you know.'

Then what's left?' Danny demanded. *"We* turn ourselves into mice and creep beneath the door?'

Brett, moving away, picked up a long-handled wine-tasting cup from a shelf. His voice had a half-amused, half-reflective quality as he cleaned it with a handkerchief. 'The idea of turning into a mouse offends me. I think there might be a better way.'

Judge Fulton, who had been showing impatience at their banter, now rose curiously from the cask. What have you in mind?'

Brett was busy filling the metal cup with wine. Straightening, he held out

the cup to them in a toast, his smile characteristically quizzical. T suggest we are subtle, sir, and use the advantages of the terrain.'

'And what does that mean in plain English?' Danny asked.

Brett told him. When he finished, both Danny and the judge showed interest. 'It might work,' the American said enthusiastically.

'It could also get us shot,' Brett said, sipping fastidiously at the wine.

Danny walked towards him. *We get shot anyway, don't we? So what have we got to lose?'

CHAPTER NINE

Triver and Gallard clattered down the stone steps. They were followed by Dupont and Covey. Grim-faced and purposeful, all four men were carrying pistols. Ahead of them a narrow stone corridor led to the door of the cellar. As they reached the bottom of the steps Triver gave an exclamation and halted. As all four men listened they heard the sound of singing coming from the cellar. For a moment there was disbelief in the glances they gave one another. Then, at a sharp word from Dupont, Triver pulled a key from his pocket and led the party forward again.

At the door the singing, punctuated by shouts of laughter, was loud and ribald. Triver looked almost shaken by the sound. 'They sound high,' he muttered. What do you make of it?'

Unsmiling, Dupont pushed his heavy body forward. 'Get it open.'

Inserting the key, Triver gingerly pushed at the door. The scene as it swung open brought a wide grin from the muscular Gallard. Arms around one another, Brett, Fulton, and Danny were in a group in the middle of the cellar. All were holding wine cups and from their appearance they had been drinking hard for a long time. Wine lay in small pools on the floor or ran in tiny rivulets from cask-taps that had not been fully turned off. With uncorked bottles littering the floor, the scene was pure Bacchanalian.

Danny, who had his back to the door, appeared to be conducting the singing and as the four men filed in he swung his wine cup enthusiastically. 'Great. That was great. Let's have it again.'

The swaying trio broke into deafening voice again. Although none of the gangsters recognized it, the chorus was the *Eton Boating Song.* Shaking his head, Covey turned to Dupont. 'They must have guessed what was coming to them and cracked.'

At that moment Danny turned and saw them. Waving a hand, he staggered forward. 'Hiya, fellers! Come in an' have a drink . . .' Grabbing a barrel for support, he gave them a wink. 'Plenty for everybody... I'm paying.'

When nobody answered him he stumbled over to Brett, who was still singing, and gave him a nudge in the ribs, 'Milord... we have guests.'

Brett gave a loud hiccup as he tried to focus on Danny. The American lifted

an admonishing finger. 'Ssssh. Where's your manners?'

Grinning foolishly, Brett started towards Dupont and company. His slurred voice was barely intelligible. 'Manners ... gent. .. men. My ... apologies. Welcome ...' Bowing low, he lost his balance and fell flat on his face at Dupont's feet. He hiccuped again and then lay still. Dupont stepped over him in disgust and jerked his pistol at Triver.

'Get them outside. Finish them I'

Danny waved a protesting hand. 'Not finish . .. Only beginning ... Have another drink...'

Grinning happily he fondly embraced both Gallard and Triver. The two heavies looked almost embarrassed as they tried to disentangle themselves. Clinging like a limpet, Danny pulled them nearer like old friends. 'Nice ... of you guys to come. Jus' like ole times. Nice of you ...'

With startling suddenness he straightened and slammed their heads together. Half-stunned, both men sank to the floor. At the same moment Brett rolled over expertly and knocked Covey's legs from under him. In the same movement he tried to seize Dupont's legs but although the gang leader stumbled he managed to pull clear and back into the doorway. For a moment, as he levelled his pistol, Brett was helpless. But Fulton had run forward and he kicked the door closed as Dupont fired, knocking aside the gangster's arm and causing the bullet to ricochet harmlessly away. A second later the door slammed shut.

Behind Dupont, Vevrey had heard the tumult and was running down the stone steps. Dupont, white-faced with fury at the trick, waited for him to arrive and then pointed at the door.

'Open it!'

Vevrey hesitated, then braced himself as Dupont positioned himself to fire into the cellar. Expecting resistance Vevrey threw his weight against the door but it gave easily and he stumbled forward. Behind the door, the judge had been expecting the move and he swung a full bottle of wine on the back of the man's head. Vevrey dropped like a limp sack to the floor, groaned once, and lay still.

Fulton tried to slam the door again on the armed Dupont but for a moment the gang leader resisted him. Inside the cellar Brett and Danny were engaged with Triver and Covey, the two gangsters who had regained their feet. Ignoring the risk to his own men, Dupont took a shot at Danny that the judge once again managed to divert. A second later Dupont jumped back and again allowed the door to slam closed.

By this time Brett had disposed of the half-stunned Triver, and Danny had caught Covey with a punch that stretched him out unconscious over a wine cask. Grabbing up a pistol, Brett approached the door that Fulton was holding closed. Waving him aside, Brett gingerly pulled the door open, at the same time leaping aside. A shot made him flatten against the wall. Then he heard footsteps running up the stone steps and he nodded at Danny who joined him.

"Let's go and get him.'

They ran out into the passage. The judge, looking shaken but determined, followed. He had taken the cellar key from the unconscious Triver and his face as he swung the heavy door closed and locked it betrayed his intense satisfaction.

Approaching the top of the steps cautiously, Brett and Danny could see no sign of Dupont. With Brett, who was carrying the pistol, in the lead, they moved silently down a wide passage. The door at the far end was a couple of inches ajar and Brett glanced at the American. 'Ready?'

Danny nodded. Flat against the wall, Brett kicked the door open with his foot. Nothing stirred in the wine room. The two men edged a couple more feet forward, then Brett gave a start. Over by the desk he could see Maria standing by the telephone. She looked pale and frightened. 'What is it?' Brett asked tersely.

She swallowed. 'Nothing. I'm all right.'

He took a tentative step forward, then gave a sharp gasp of pain as a cane slashed down on his wrist, making him drop the pistol. Before he could grab it, it was kicked across the room. Straightening, he found himself face to face with Dupont, who was pointing a pistol at his stomach. The gang leader stepped back a few paces, and then waved Danny up alongside the Englishman. His voice was quiet with menace.

'That was clever. You nearly made it. I must make certain I take good care of the old man. He recruits resourceful lieutenants.'

Both men were sizing up their chances and both knew they were nil. The gang leader's purposeful withdrawal a few paces had told them he was an expert gunman. If they made a desperate attack, he had given himself ample time to shoot,

Danny tried a lie. You're too late, Dupont. The old man's already got away in our car. You'll have the police here in a few minutes.'

He received a thin smile. 'Try again. To escape, the old man has to come through that door.' The pistol raised a few inches and steadied. Tm sorry but you should never have let that old fool talk you into helping him.'

His intention was unmistakable and deadly. As both men braced themselves, there was the loud crack of a pistol shot. To the amazement of the two helpless men it was Dupont who staggered, clutched his shoulder, and slumped down. Behind the desk Maria was standing like an ice statue with a smoking pistol in her hand. Before her was the open drawer of the desk. As Brett kicked the pistol away from the groaning Dupont, she gave a cry of distress and sank down into a chair.

As Danny moved towards her he heard the wail of police sirens. Starded, he glanced at Brett. 'I couldn't have been right about the old man, could I?'

The judge's voice made both of them turn sharply. 'Isn't it obvious who phoned for them?'

Entering the room, Fulton crossed to the desk and put his arm around the

weeping girL Pale from reaction, he glanced up at the two men. 'Dupont's one weakness, gendemen. The Latin's faith that his family will always stand by him no matter what his crime. We owe our lives to the fact that this girl has a better understanding of what is right and wrong.'

There was an air of well-being in the judge's study that evening. Danny was sprawled in one of the leather armchairs puffing at an expensive cigar; Brett was examining one of the judge's many books on art; and Fulton was at the cocktail cabinet pouring out three generous drinks. All three men were freshly changed and looked little the worse for their experience.

The judge, a dignified figure in a velvet smoking-jacket, brought a tray round. Smiling, he lifted his glass in a toast. To a very successful enterprise, gendemen. Well done and thank you.'

Brett replaced the book and turned. 'It didn't work out too badly, did it?'

Danny sat up indignandy. Too badly? With every one of 'em behind bars. What more d'you want?'

The smile the judge hid was wickedly triumphant. "You're quite right, Mr Wilde. This is no time for English self-deprecation. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men and women will sleep sounder in their beds tonight now that Dupont's organization is broken. That is no small achievement.'

Danny gave Brett an 'I-told-you-so' stare and sank back. Fulton's wily eyes moved from one man to the other. "Nevertheless, I'm sure both you gentlemen will be glad it's over so you can return to your normal activities.'

There was a short pause. Then Danny gave a cough. 'Right. A man must lead his own life. Stands to reason. Not that it wasn't fun at times,' he conceded generously.

'Something out of the ordinary, you might say,' Brett added, sipping thoughtfully at his drink.

Hiding his expression again, Fulton turned back to the cocktail cabinet, 'I understand. You found it merely a diversion from the routine. It is a pity, because if this little adventure had been more to your liking, I might have found you another. With the world so full of crime and injustice, there is always work for men of spirit.'

Behind his back, Danny and Brett were showing their alarm at the judge's persuasive tongue. Exchanging warning glances, they began to tiptoe across the room as he went on: 'Of course, you would have to solve the problem of tolerating one another and working together as a team. But if you could overcome your differences, there is a little situation going on in Cannes at this moment that I feel certain would interest you...'

Turning, the judge gave a start of surprise to find the study empty and the boarded-up french windows wide open. As he hurried towards them he heard the sound of a high-powered car start up and blast away down the drive. Following the receding sound with his eyes, he gave a sudden chuckle and raised his glass.

'My felicitations, gentlemen I Enjoy yourselves tonight but don't think after what has happened that you can escape so easily. We shall come together again, you and I, and it could be sooner than you think.'

THE END

ANGIE...ANGIE

Based on the screenplay by

Milt Gelman

CHAPTER ONE

The bay that night was a blaze of colour and movement. Under beach lamps, on sand that had retained some of the heat of the day, a few would-be starlets still displayed their charms to onlookers or passing photographers. On the palm-fringed esplanades, with their long necklaces of coloured lights, actresses, directors and whiskered hippies mingled with labourers and giggling shop-girls. Sleek-jowled money-men rubbed shoulders with local artisans. Laughter and chatter drowned the sound of the sea. The warm air smelt of expensive scent, cheap wine, and sweat. Occasional rockets soared into the night sky and burst into spangles of stars. Glossy convertibles, draped with yet more publicity-seeking starlets, prowled round the crowded streets. People pelted one another with flowers and music blared out from a hundred over-worked cafes. The Cannes Film Festival was at its height and its razzmatazz was a fever that kept the entire populace awake.

Although the general ambience was cosmopolitan, here and there certain establishments filtered out the privileged from their less fortunate neighbours, and one such place was the Casino Royale. Its uniformed footmen, its marble steps and magnificent portico were enough in themselves to frighten away all but the boldest of tourists, and as a result, apart from a sprinkling of hirsute hippie-types from the film and television world, its flower-decked halls were mostly filled with beautifully-gowned women and men in evening dress.

A certain excitement was present in the Casino that evening. Word had spread that there was heavy betting in the roulette room, and members were flowing in its direction. Moving with them was the tall figure of Brett Sinclair. Characteristically, he was showing nothing of the excitement around him: his tanned, handsome face looked both detached and amused as he entered the room.

The main action appeared to be taking place at a table in the far corner. As Brett moved towards it, a girl crossed the marble floor ahead of him. Although the room was full of lovely women, she registered on him almost subliminally

by the sheer impact of her figure. She was tall, superbly rounded, and yet moved with the suppleness and grace of a panther. If her beauty was marred by a certain inner hardness, it was not obvious from the brief glance Brett had of her before she was lost again in the crowd.

He moved along the table until he found a gap and eased his way forward. On his right, at the end of the table, was a man in his middle fifties. Bull-necked, with once-powerful muscles running to seed, the man was an American named Kyle Sandor and it was his heavy gambling that had stirred the interest of the crowd. Alongside him was his right-hand man, another American named Ben McBride. Years of riding shotgun on Kyle had taken their toll of the forty-year-old Ben. He had thinning hair, a worried face, and dandruff on the shoulders of his suit. In close attendance were two bodyguards, powerful men with trained, watchful eyes.

Behind the group was a pair of french windows with luxurious velvet curtains drawn across them. The statuesque girl had drifted towards the windows. While her expression suggested she shared the crowd's interest in Sandor's heavy gambling, she also appeared to find the room oppressive for, as she reached the curtains, she slipped her hand between them and turned the key in the lock. The act was partly concealed as if the girl did not want her discomfort to be noticed by the Casino's attentive staff. Opening one of the windows a few inches, she stood to one side, clearly relishing the night breeze that gently stirred the curtains.

She was in range of Brett's vision as he stood riffling through his chips and deciding on a number to play. His appearance at the table had drawn the eyes of Sandor's bodyguards who assessed him carefully before giving their attention back to the gathering crowd.

The croupier's chant sounded above the buzz of conversation. 'Fakes vos jeux, messieurs et madames. Faites vos jeux.'

Men and women leaned forward to place their bets. Brett covered number nine with half a dozen chips. The crowd stirred as Kyle Sandor pushed a pile of chips on to number fourteen. The wheel began spinning, the white ball clicking over the polished surface. As the players leaned forward expectantly, the girl by the french windows came into Brett's sight again. Something about her frozen smile and taut body drew his gaze away from the wheel. He saw the curtains stir again as if by the breeze and a small, dark object edge into the slit between them. It was pointing at Kyle Sandor's back and Brett recognized the ugly shape of a revolver equipped with a silencer.

For Brett the tableau seemed to freeze for a split second: the shaded lights, the dancing white ball, the circle of eager, unsuspecting faces. Then, as his shout rang out, the scene fragmented into violent action.

'Behind you! Look out I'

Kyle Sandor and Ben jerked upright and spun round. The first bodyguard leapt protectingly behind Sandor. The second one shouted something and started towards Brett. At almost the same moment there was a muffled report.

The first bodyguard clutched his shoulder, did a half-pirouette, and collapsed at Sandor's feet. Brett, who had lunged forward as he shouted, ducked the grab of the second guard and ran towards the french windows, passing the girl on his way. Throwing the windows open he leapt out and then paused a second to take stock of his surroundings.

He was standing on a terrace edged by a stone balustrade. Ahead of him, flanked by two large jars of flowers, a couple of steps led down to a lawn that was illuminated by the lights of the Casino. Beyond the lights were the flowerbeds and shrubs of an ornamental garden. As Brett listened he heard twigs snapping underfoot. Jumping down the steps he raced across the lawn to a shadowy clump of bushes. Finding the bushes empty, he listened again and heard the sound of a high-powered car kicking in and roaring up the drive. Shrugging, he started back across the lawn.

He had almost reached the steps to the terrace when he was grabbed and slammed heavily against the stone balustrade. The second bodyguard was at one side of him and Ben at the other, and neither man was gentle with his arm-lock. Seeing Brett's plight, the maitre of the Casino came running frantically across the lawn. 'Messieurs, please. You have the wrong man. This is Lord Brett Sinclair. All my staff can vouch for him.'

Hearing Brett's title, the lugubrious Ben looked as if he had popped another ulcer as he released the Englishman and turned to the equally surprised bodyguard. 'Go and get Mr Sandor back to his hotel. And do your job better the next time.'

As the burly bodyguard ran back to the terrace, the contrite Ben turned back to Brett. 'I'm real sorry, sir. It was your hollering out like that. It made us think .. .' He tried to brush Brett down. Tou all right?'

Brett pulled impatiently away. 'Don't worry about me. Did you get the girl?'

Ben's stare was blank. What girl?'

In his mind's eye Brett was seeing the beautiful statuesque figure with its frozen, expected smile. As he moved back with Ben to the Casino, his voice was thoughtful, 'What girl? That's something you'd do well to find out,'

Across the feverish city with its palatial hotels and cin£-theatres a high-powered car was drawing up outside a nightclub. Before the uniformed driver could climb out, Danny Wilde leaned forward and tapped his shoulder. The American, wearing an expensive linen suit, looked in an ebullient mood.

Tm going inside to check the action, Charley. If I'm not back in a couple of minutes, it means it's great and I'm staying.'

Whistling, Danny jumped out and ran up the steps. As a gorgeous receptionist with a dipping neckline and micro-miniskirt appeared in the open doorway, the driver grinned and switched on his engine.

Tipping the girl and kissing her on both cheeks, Danny swung across the carpeted foyer to a doorway. On a dais across the dance floor an acid rock-band was pouring out pop in a psychedelic frenzy. The fights on the walls and ceiling looked hke hot paint dripping into ever-changing swirls of colour. Between the tables that surrounded the floor, couples gyrated abandonedly to

the hypnotic beat.

Danny took in the scene with undisguised pleasure. As he stepped on to die floor, a gorgeous hippie-type starlet, eyes closed in the ecstasy of the beat, collided into him. As consciousness returned and she stared into his tanned, grinning face, she gave an enticing smile and crooked a finger. Testing the beat, Danny grinned again and moved forward.

'Let's hit it, baby.'

Allowing the beat to take them, they gyrated on the fringe of the pack of dancers. The girl, whose eyes had closed again, was all shapely legs and undulating curves. Danny was on his best form, head leaning back, body swinging to the music. As he rotated around the girl his eyes suddenly focused on a man's head that appeared at the far end of the floor. It vanished almost immediately among the other dancers and the shifting lights, but as Danny was telling himself it was his imagination, it appeared again, a cork bobbing up among the whirlpool of movement.

The man, who looked as if he came from Jewish or southern Latin parentage, noticed Danny at almost the same moment, and his reaction was identical, first total disbelief, then **pure** delight.

Danny had thrown up his arms and was yelling 'Hey! Angie - Angie 1'

The music drowned his shout but Angie grinned and waved back. Forgetting their partners, both men pushed excitedly through the packed dancers towards one another. Danny's starlet had her eyes tightly closed again and went on grooving, oblivious that he had left her.

The two men met in the centre of the floor. Laughing, embracing, they yelled at one another but could hear nothing over the din of the band. Danny pointed to an empty table in the far corner and they worked their way towards it. Pushing Angie into a chair, Danny sank into one alongside him. For a moment neither of them spoke, grinning at one another with the love of old friends. Then Danny let out another whoop of delight and slapped Angie's shoulder. 'You know, this is really something 1' The man, chunky of build, had a mop of black hair that fringed down almost to his eyebrows. His rugged, swarthy face wore a grin as expansive as Danny's. 'Something, kid? It's out of this world.' 'All these years. How long has it been?'

Angie laughed. Although he was wearing a suit hand-tailored to the last stitch, everything about him suggested he had come to wealth from hardship and poverty. 'How long? You mean since I dropped outta high school? Say, you've made it big, Tiger. I keep readin' in the papers about you.'

Danny leaned forward and fingered the lapels of his suit with admiration. 'Some threads. Looks like you've done all right yourself.'

Angie shrugged. 'You and me, kid. Didn't I always say?'

'Long road - fast track, huh? Remember the way we used to club those rats in that railroad flat you lived in?'

'Long road, kid. But listen. Now I've got me a suite of rooms at the Palace that's so big Old Man Busateri could drive his garbage truck right through it.'

Both men grinned at the memory. 'Busateri!' Danny said. 'He busted your head pretty good when he caught us hitching rides. And who always took the hidings for me? You, you big lug.'

Angie winked at him, then nodded at the dance floor with its curvacious starlets. 'Get a load of *this* garbage 1'

"Yeah. Just like the movies.'

'An' we're the stars, kid.'

Danny grinned. *You've got it made, huh?'

Angie shrugged. TTou know me, Tiger. A bit of a killing here, a shot at a big score there ...'

"But why Cannes?' Danny interrupted.

The Film Festival, Tiger! You remember me and the flicks.'

"Yeah. You always were hooked on them. Remember how we used to sneak into the Oriental?'

With the floodgates of nostalgia opened, both men lost themselves in a stream of reminiscences. The effect was to evoke a sentimentality that was almost childlike. Smiling, Angie put his arm on the table and held up his wrist. Danny caught on immediately and extended his own arm so that their wrists touched.

•Blood brothers,' Danny said quietly.

The rugged lines of Angie's face were soft. 'That's right. You and me, kid. Always.'

There was a sudden b-z-z-z-z-z as Danny's wristwatch alarm sounded. Angie's arm jerked back as if it had been burned. Danny showed him the watch as he switched off the alarm, and Angie laughed with him. Regretfully Danny climbed to his feet.

'Must get some shut-eye, Angie. I've a big day tomorrow.'

'You have, kid? What gives?'

Tlenty. But first my bank manager. I'm trying to hit him for a big loan.'

Angie grinned and rose with him. 'That's the way, Tiger. Never give those suckers an even break.'

Danny held out his hand. 'Listen - now we've found one another again, you're not getting away so easy. What say we meet tomorrow?'

Angie nodded enthusiastically. "You took the words from me, Tiger. See you in the pool-hall. OK?'

'It's a deal, man. See you.'

Giving him a good-natured shove, Danny hurried towards the exit, making a playful pass at a giggling starlet on his way. Angie, smiling and shaking his head at the way Fate played its cards, stood watching him until he disappeared.

Danny paused on the steps of the bank and gazed around him contentedly. The wide road, flooded with morning sunlight, was full of colour and interest. In the shadow of the palms and gum trees that ran down the centre, groups of old men played boule. On either side of the road people chatted at cafe tables or sauntered along the wide pavements sightseeing. And there were plenty of sights to see, Danny reflected, as his eyes followed one of the many girls in bikinis who flittered past like butterflies.

He entered the shadows of the bank with regret, only for his face to brighten again as a very attractive secretary approached him.

"You are Monsieur Wilde?'

She received the American's most boyish smile. 'That's right.'

"The bank manager is ready, m'sieur. If you will come this way ...'

Danny checked her. 'Mind you, I can think of a good reason for being late. Only I'll need your cooperation.'

At first she did not understand. Then, as his eyes ran roguishly over her, a dimple appeared in one smooth cheek. 'Please follow me, m'sieur.'

Turning, she led him to a large office. As she knocked on the door and a voice answered, her dimple showed again. Tour interview, m'sieur.'

'A pity,' Danny sighed. 'There's only one answer - spend this loan quickly and come back again soon.'

Returning the girl's smile, he squared his shoulders and marched into the office. His prepared words of greeting choked off as he stared at the elderly, smiling man behind the desk.

'You! I don't believe it!'

A cool, rueful voice made him start. 'Good morning, my poor, fellow-trapped soul.'

Danny spun round, Brett, legs folded and coolly resigned, was seated in a leather armchair by the window. The American's expression of dismay turned into shock. 'You too? What is this? Another nightmare?'

A chuckle came from the desk where the grey-haired Judge Fulton looked relaxed and thoroughly in charge of the situation. 'A surprise for you, Mr Wilde. I'm glad you feel free to express your dismay.'

Dripping venom, Danny turned back to him. 'Don't you mean horror?'

He received a benevolent smile. 'Come, Mr Wilde. Or, after our adventure together, perhaps I might call you Danny? When you hear my proposition, it will all seem quite different. Why don't you take that armchair alongside Lord Sinclair?'

'And become a fall-guy again?' Danny demanded. He stalked grimly to the door. "Whatever it is, the answer's no. Negative NO. And just in case you get up to any more of your tricks, I'm going to hire me someone to keep a watch out for you.'

He turned to march out, only to freeze at the judge's quiet voice. 'Am I right in thinking you came for a loan this morning? To enable you to complete your vacation village deal?'

The effect was electric Danny spun round, his mouth dropping open. 'But you can't...'

‘Wrong, I can,' Fulton said with some relish. 'I happen to be the bank's legal counsel.'

Danny raised his eyes to the ceiling and started for the armchair alongside Brett. 'Of course! What else?' As he sank down, he turned in despair to the resigned Englishman. *How can an ex-judge lower himself to blackmail?'

'A good question,' Brett said dryly. 'He's found out that because of that Polish ballet-dancer I'm a bit overdrawn myself.'

Danny gave a snort of disgust. 'Naturally. So now he calls the tune while we dance some cockamamie Kazatsky for him.'

'Impeccable logic,' the Englishman agreed. 'Which means you might as well fasten your tutu.'

Fulton's benign gaze moved from one to the other. 'I intend to have your loans cleared in four days' time. Just as soon as someone I'm interested in leaves Cannes alive.'

'Like who?' Danny muttered.

"Kyle Sandor.'

Danny straightened at the name, serious for the first time that morning. 'You mean the union boss?'

"Ex-union boss,' Brett corrected.

Tou in Cannes I can understand,' Danny told the Englishman. *But a serious guy like Sandor - it doesn't fit.'

"Why not? This is the first vacation of his life. Why shouldn't he enjoy a little Festival fun?'

That kind of fun can be fatal,' Danny grinned.

The judge's dry words made the American start. 'Last night it nearly was. An attempt was made on his life. Unsuccessfully, thanks to Brett.'

‘You're kidding! You must be I'

'Someone tried with a silencer,' Brett told him. 'In the roulette room of the Casino.'

‘You saw it happen?'

‘I saw the pistol, yes.'

‘What about the hitman? Didn't you nail him?'

'No. No one even saw him.'

'Any angles?' Danny asked.

Brett nodded at the judge who pulled a publicity handout from a folder. It was a cheesecake photograph of the girl in the Casino the previous evening. Danny gave a low whistle of admiration.

'Some chick. Who is she?'

'Her name is Marissa Nave, a so-called starlet. One who is always around when "the action", as you call it, is going on.'

'She was around with the action at the Casino last night,' Brett explained. 'I saw her set things up for the attempt on Sandor's life.'

Danny grimaced as he handed the photograph back to Fulton. 'Thanks for telling me in time. But I don't get it. Why should anyone use Sandor for a target? He's done wonders with his union.'

Fulton slid the photograph back into its folder. 'He's also had to make a few deals on the way both with the management and with gangsters.'

It was then Danny remembered. "Wait a minute. Didn't I read something the other day about a Congressional Investigation? On crime taking over the unions?'

'That is correct. The Investigation begins this week. And Kyle Sandor intends to testify.'

'If the hoods let him,' Danny added thoughtfully.

'Correct again, Mr Wilde. And I'm greatly afraid they will not unless you and Brett make it your urgent business to find this girl.'

The bow wave of the speedboat was white against the blue-green sea. Behind it a man on water-skis jinked and wove in spectacular fashion. A flotilla of bikini-clad girls, pedalling water-cycles, turned and waved to him. On the beach, bronzed bodies lay worshipping the late afternoon sun.

Danny's binoculars moved back from the water-skier to the flotilla of girls. He was sitting with Brett at a patio table above the beach. As he concentrated on the girls again, Brett stirred impatiently. 'Well. Do you see anything?'

Danny lowered the binoculars and grinned. 'Everything, pal.'

Brett snatched the glasses from him. We've got to find that girL Quickly. I need that loan and I've also got a date in St Raphael in a couple of days. And it's too delectable to miss.'

Danny reached down and rubbed a sandalled foot with some feeling. 'What've we been trying to do all day? I reckon we must've walked to the Italian border and back.'

Brett was scanning the beach, the binoculars pausing on every shapely girl in sight. Danny leaned forward humorously. TTou've gotta admit there's always a pleasant side to the old guy's assignments.'

Brett lowered the glasses. 'She's not here. So it's the hotel swimming-pools next. You take the ones on the right. I'll go left.'

Danny shook his head and tapped his watch. 'Tomorrow, paL I almost forgot Let's go.'

'Go where?' Brett asked as the American rose.

'An old friend of mine - my best buddy from my childhood - showed up last night. I want you to meet him. Let's go and get changed.'

Brett gave a frown of exasperation. 'I've just told you -I can't afford to lose that loan.'

'Neither can I, pal. But I'm only asking you to say hello.'

Tm all for social graces,' Brett said sarcastically, 'and it's a pleasant surprise to discover you have one or two. But we simply don't have the time...'

Danny yanked the Englishman to his feet. 'Stop arguing, paL As far as that

femme is concerned, we can *chercher* her later.'

Reluctantly, Brett allowed Danny to lead him from the patio to the road above. 'This buddy, as you call him in your revolting language, seems to have some special meaning for you.'

'Special meaning 1 Listen - Angie and I together could take on the world. And leave it flat on the canvas.' 'How long is it since the two of you last met?' 'Oh, ages. Not since we were kids in the Bronx.' Brett sighed. Then as you appear to be in danger of disappointment, you must forgive me for one of my rare moments of sincerity. Let me remind you that in this life everything passes and everything changes. Even old friends.' Danny gave him a stare, then a laugh of derision. 'Me and Angie 1 That's a joke, pal. Just wait until you meet him.'

The three red snooker balls were grouped in a tight bunch at the far end of the table. There was a sharp crack as the cue-ball struck them and one of the reds shot off crisply into a pocket. Danny gave a murmur of admiration. *Bingo Ij What next?'

Angie, whose rolled-up shirtsleeves displayed powerful, hairy arms, walked casually round the green-baized table. Brett, who was his opponent and.so far had hardly touched a ball, was leaning on his cue looking extremely bored. Danny, retrieving the balls, was aglow with admiration as Angie leaned forward and sighted along his cue. There was an air about the swarthy American that suggested a great poolroom hustler as he paused to glance up at Danny.

'Pity these Frenchies don't play pocket pooL Still, snooker's OK. Black I'

Etis cue shot out like a rattler's tongue and the black snapped into a side pocket. Danny set it back on its spot as Angie sighted for his next shot, a tough one with the two red balls tight against a cushion. Danny grimaced.

'Bad shapes.'

Angie raised his head. 'Like to make it interesting? Fiver says I go out with eight balls or less?'

Danny grinned. 'Covered.'

Angie got down to business immediately. Casual and yet fast, he stalked round the table like a professional gunman at target practice. His first shot sank the two remaining reds. He called black and it went into a corner pocket like an anti-tank shell. Left with the six coloured balls, he began a merciless annihilation, keeping a conversation going as he sighted and jabbed. Even Brett was moved to applause as the yellow went right round the table before dropping into a side pocket.

'Nice shot!'

Angie indicated the green as he moved into position. *Hey, Danny. You remember them O'Briens?'

Them Irish kids that used to gang up on us? Sure.'

'What about the Cohens who had that dishy sister?'

Teah. Wasn't she something?'

Brett blinked as the green crashed home. Tou two have more old friends than...'

'Potatoes, stupid,' Danny interrupted. 'Why don't you get literate?'

Angie, settling on the brown, chuckled. 'Potatoes I Never tasted good unless we stole 'em from Papa Wolszinski's vegetable market.'

The brown sizzled into the far-off top pocket. Danny turned to Brett. "How about that?'

'Very adept,' Brett conceded.

Danny waited until the blue drifted home and the cue ball screwed back as if by magic to set up the pink for the kill. "You mean great, pal. The greatest I Angle's a natchel-born athlete.'

Brett gave him a quizzical glance. 'Quite. However, enjoyable as this has been, I must point out the time . ..'

'A natchel-born athlete,' Danny repeated, over-riding him. 'No kidding. You're looking at the only two-sewer man in the. old neighbourhood.'

Brett's stare was blank. With the influence of the two Americans on one another accentuating their slang, it was becoming as meaningless as Zulu to the Englishman. Danny noticed it and grinned,

'Stickball, dummy I'

Brett's face cleared. 'Oh. You mean *rounders.'*

Angie's cue poised in mid-air and he and Danny gazed at one another as if Brett were a new form of animal life.

"Where's rounders?' Angie asked.

Brett explained. 'The batsman hits the ball and the idea is to run round the bases before...'

'But that's baseball,' Danny said.

Brett nodded. That's right. You Americans stole it from us. In fact, you've stolen just about everything from us -games, inventions, colonies.' Hiding his smile, he glanced down at his watch. 'And time as well. Which we appear to have run out of.'

Angie turned to Danny. 'What's with his big rush?'

'He's looking for some chick,' Danny explained.

Angie settled down for the pink ball. 'I wouldn't have thought that hard for a real lord,' he grunted. "What's the chick - a duchess?' He casually stroked the cue ball, which sank the pink and rolled back in perfect position for the strike on the black. Before making it, Angie glanced up. 'Hey, Tiger. Remember how those stickballs smelled?'

'Can I? Just like vanilla.'

The cue lanced out and the black crashed home. Turning, Angie held out his hand for his winnings. 'Another game, gents?' he grinned.

Brett shook his head apologetically. 'Thanks. But we really must be going now.'

You can't,' Angie protested. 'I've got someone special coming I want you to

meet.'

Danny, as reluctant to leave as Brett was for them to go, gave the swarthy American a wink and took three balls up to the far end of the table. As he began setting them up, Brett returned his cue to the rack and started putting on his jacket.

'Sorry about this, but it can't be helped. Another time, perhaps.'

Danny's voice drifted casually towards him. 'Bet he can't!'

The two Americans exchanged a grin. They had become real hustlers now, setting up their victim. Angie pretended to protest. 'Naa, you can't do that, Tiger. He's your buddy.'

Brett eyed them curiously. 'Can't do what?'

Danny straightened up and Brett saw he had placed two red balls tightly against the top cushion with the black resting delicately on top of them so that the three balls formed an upright triangle. Danny gave Angie a hurt look. 'Sure he's my buddy and I'm helping him. I'm giving him a chance to break even.'

Angie gave a reluctant shrug. 'I still think it's too tough for him. But you know the guy better than me.' He turned towards the innocent Brett. 'It's a trick shot, pal. If you make it, you're even-steven. If you miss out, it's double what you've lost. My advice is leave it. But it's your call'

Brett removed his jacket and collected his cue again. •What do I do?'

With the challenge accepted, the two Americans winked at one another again. 'You see that black ball?' Angie said. 'The bet is you can't hit it with the cue ball without touching the reds.'

Danny pretended to relent. 'I guess you're right, Angie. My buddy, El Lordo here, he's never backed off a chance yet, but this is one for the experts. Better cry off, Brett pal.'

Brett froze them both with a stare as he chalked his cue. Both men hid their delight as he went to the foot of the table and squinted along his cue at the obviously impossible shot. Straightening up, with the butt of his cue pointing at the floor, he favoured them with another icy stare, a superb picture of offended nobility.

'Gentlemen - I would have you know that the British public-school system provides the most complete education in the world. Snooker, you shall learn, was invented by Lieutenant Sir Neville Chamberlain of the Devonshire Regiment...'

Both of Angie's black eyebrows had lifted. 'It was?'

Ignoring him, Brett suddenly slammed the butt of the cue hard against the floor. The impact jarred the table enough to disturb the two red balls which, rolling apart, brought the black one down to the table. Hardly deigning to look, Brett sent his cue ball up the table and drove the black into a pocket His voice ran on coolly as he straightened: 'He was stationed in Jubbulpore in India at the time. The date was 1875.'

The two Americans let out a loud yell of laughter. Brett, dropping his act of offended dignity, joined in with them. Angie, with tears streaming down his swarthy cheeks, slapped Danny on the back.

'Can you beat that? This guy's great - I like him.'

Danny was laughing too hard to answer. As Brett turned to replace his cue in the rack he noticed someone standing in the doorway. His change of expression went unnoticed by the laughing Americans.

'Angie,' he said quietly. Whom did you say you wanted us to meet?'

Angie, still doubled up, found it difficult to answer. 'My girlfriend, pal.' Rubbing the tears from his eyes, he turned to the equally hysterical Danny. "Listen - you remember Charlie Banana's broad - the one they called Mohair?'

Danny knuckled his own streaming eyes. 'Do I? Va-va-vrooml'

'Well, kid, she was nothing - nothing compared to this number. And she's crazy about me.'

'Something special, huh?' Danny grinned.

Brett was not listening to them. His eyes were fixed on the shapely, statuesque girl in the doorway. It was Marissa and from her expression, the peculiar hard smile of anticipation. she had worn at the Casino, it was impossible to know whether his presence there had startled her or not. He moved forward to speak to her but had not taken two steps before she disappeared.

CHAPTER THREE

Danny's face was a study in exasperation. There has to be a mistake. I tell you she can't be the same girL'

Fulton, sitting in a deep armchair, sighed. 'Brett is quite positive it was her.'

'Brett could be wrong,' Danny growled. 'But even if it was her, couldn't it have been a coincidence? Maybe she'd come to the pool-hall to meet another guy.'

Brett, sprawled out in the other armchair, lifted his shoulders. "When Angie was expecting his girlfriend at any moment? You don't believe it was coincidence any more than I do.'

The two' men were in Judge Fulton's office in his country villa where they had driven after saying goodbye to Angie. Danny's uncharacteristic anger was a measure of his loyalty to his friend as he reacted to Brett's raised eyebrows.

'Don't look at me like that. I tell you I know Angie. Perhaps better than I know myself. And he's no killer. I'd stake my life on it.'

The judge interrupted him dryly. 'It's not your life that's in question, Danny. It's Kyle Sandor's. And so far your friend Angie is our only suspect.'

Danny jerked away. He went to the door and turned, his bitter eyes on Brett. 'Get this clear - both of you. I'm in this - all the way. But only for one reason. To prove to both of you that Angie's clean.'

He slammed the door behind him as he walked out. As Brett grimaced and moved to follow, Fulton's quiet voice checked him. 'Your job is to prove the opposite. A man's life might rest on it, so don't let sentiment get in your way.'

Sandor glowered out from the hotel window for a moment, then spun round. Bull-necked, incensed, he stared at the lined, worried face before him. 'What's the matter with you, Ben? You think I'm afraid of them?'

Ben spread out his arms, an expression of despair. *You can't ignore them this way, Kyle. They'll try again, believe me.'

Sandor growled and smashed a massive fist into a calloused hand. 'So they'll try again, the miserable punks. You think after the way we've sweated all these years they're going to get the union into their back pocket now? I can't wait to get in front of that Senate Committee.'

Ben's weary face lifted to the ceiling in despair. 'Kyle, we've retired. We've got a right to rest. You've got a right to your life ...'

Sandoi^s laugh of disgust echoed round the room. 'My life? You mean the bit that's left, don't you? All the rest's gone into the union - it's my monument, Ben, and no one's going to throw dirt on it. Oh, I've made some bad moves - sure I have. But they'd have had to wait for Hell to freeze over if I'd known these hoods were waitin' to take the union after I stepped down.'

In the far corner of the room Sander's two bodyguards, one with his arm in a sling, were bent over a card table. Although they were going through the morions of playing pinochle, both were listening closely to the heated argument. Ben looked in despair as he made his last effort.

'Kyle, I beg you - get in touch with them before it's too late. Tell them you won't make those hearings.'

Sander's fist, crashing down on a table, made the room shake. 'Nol'

'Then at least stay under cover while you're here/ Ben begged.

His only reward for his solicitude was a fierce glare. 'Why should I? This is the first vacation of my life and I haven't come all this way to hide in a toilet. All my life I've gone for movies, Ben, and now I'm right in the middle of the Film Festival I'm missing nothing. Got it, Ben - nothing 1'

The wounded bodyguard glanced up at his companion and winced as Sandor went on: 'Where's that invitation you promised me?'

His shoulders sagging in defeat, Ben fumbled in his pocket and held out a gilt-edged card. As Sandor examined it in delight, the long-suffering Ben gave a groan.

'Nothing makes sense any more. You don't even understand Bulgarian.'

Sandor grinned. 'What's the difference? I hear it's worth a million laughs.'

'It ain't worth a million tears,' Ben muttered. Then, seeing Sandor's expression: 'All right. You can go - if I can reserve enough seats around this one to make sure you're covered.'

Giving his big laugh, Sandor threw an arm round Ben and walked him to the door. You go an' do that, Ben. Use your pull. I came here for fun and no hoods are going to stop me having it.'

The clay pigeon spun into the sunlight, cutting the sweep of the mountains opposite. A shotgun crashed out and the target disc shattered into a dozen

fragments.

Angie gave a laugh of delight. Wearing a windcheater and slacks, he was operating a portable claypigeon launcher on a rubble-strewn ledge that lay along a mountain road. Behind him was a square metal shield. A few yards from him the ledge fell steeply into a wide valley. The mountains opposite were sun-bleached against the blue sky.

Angie took another target disc from the pile alongside him and fitted it into the sling. It was clear he was enjoying himself hugely. 'Man, with a slingshot like this, nobody invading our territory would've stood a chance, heh, Tiger?'

Danny and Brett, both wearing shooting jackets and carrying shotguns, were standing at the other end of the ledge. Brett, who had just fired, was standing back to reload. Danny, taking position, grinned at his friend's remark.

'You said it, Angie. OK. Let her go!'

Angie triggered the sling and another clay pigeon sailed over the valley. Danny followed it with a smooth arc of the shotgun, fired, and the disc shattered. As echoes came back from the mountains, Angie flopped back on his elbows laughing.

‘Hey; this is some fun.'

Danny turned to Brett who had slipped two more shells into his shotgun. As their eyes met a flicker of agreement passed between them. Closing the breech of his gun, Brett walked over to Angie. Tour turn,' he said casually.

Angie gave a start. 'Huh?'

Brett tossed the shotgun at him. Angie, fumbling clumsily, just managed to catch it before it struck the ground. Brett moved behind the metal shield. 'I'll handle the sling. You take a turn at shooting.'

Angie threw Danny an appealing glance as Brett slipped another target disc into place. 'I don't know anything about guns. You know that, Tiger.'

Brett cocked the launcher. 'Come on, Angie,' he urged. You're a two-sewer man. A natural-born athlete.’

Angle was taking the ribbing well Tfou two givin' me the go-over?'

Danny grinned. rWe wouldn't do that. Come on, kid -show the Limey a thing or two.'

Sighing resignedly, Angie took station alongside Danny. Setting himself with some trepidation, he raised the shotgun. His action was clumsy, the butt too slack against his shoulder. Danny took the shotgun from him, cocked it, and snugged it more tightly into position. Looking uncomfortable, Angie swung it up in a stiff arc. *OK,' he muttered. "Where's the target?' Brett triggered the launcher. Missing the disc as it sailed past, Angie swung the shotgun in too wide an arc and forced Danny to duck. The crash of the shot brought splinters flying from a rock at the end of the ledge. The untouched target floated on down the valley.

Angie, who had forgotten to hold the shotgun tightly as he fired, stumbled back with the recoil and sat down. Danny, immensely relieved that his friend's unfamiliarity with firearms had been so blatantly exposed, gave a hilarious

laugh as Angie rubbed his shoulder.

'Some killer you are,' he grinned, dusting Angie down. The incautious comment checked Angie's own laughter. Darting a glance at Brett, he shoved the gun back at Danny. 'Had enough?'

Danny's blush was a dead give-away. "What d'you mean, kid?'

For a split second Angie's eyes were withdrawn and watchfuL 'Don't tell me you don't know. That was some kind of a test, wasn't it?'

The glance Danny threw Brett was a call for help. 'I don't know what you're talking about. The two of us were just foolin', that's all.' 'Foolin'? When you know the way I feel about guns? And what ahout you? Don't you remember the way you cried when Tutti Francesca, the kid who was studying to be a priest, blew his brains out playing with his old man's Police 38. Didn't you learn anythin' from that, like I did?'

Danny was looking very contrite and crestfallen now. 'Sorry, kid. But we didn't mean anything...'

The throaty hum of a sports car coming up the mountain road made them both turn. A white Floride swept round a hairpin and jerked to a halt. His good humour restored, Angie glanced back at Danny. 'Forget it, Tiger. I know it was only a joke. In any case, back there I've got something for a sore shoulder that's a hundred times better'n horse liniment.'

Danny was staring with dismay at the Floride that had parked behind his car. The girl staring across the road at them was Marissa. As Angie waved and started towards her, Danny took a step after him. 'Angie. Wait a minute...'

Angie grinned back at him. 'I said forget it, kid. I know it was only a joke. See ya both later in the poolhalL'

Both men watched him scramble over the rocks to the girl's car and jump in. Gunning the engine, Marissa shot away almost before Angie had time to wave. As a cloud of dust settled on the rocks and the snarl of the car turned into a receding hum, Danny felt Brett's eyes on him. He turned. defiandy.

'So what does it prove?'

It proves she didn't recognize me last night,' Brett said.

That's not what I meant. If she's the same girl, she's working for someone else. Not for Angie. Didn't I prove it? You saw how he handled that gun.'

Brett nodded dryly. 'Yes. It was a triumph. Of inexper-tise!'

Breathing hard, Danny snatched up his shotgun and started for the road. Brett caught up with him before he could slam his car door closed.

'Danny, you've got to admit anyone can miss a target. Even a sharpshooter.'

The American's resentful face stared up at him. 'What's wrong with you, snob? Does a guy like Angie, who still hasn't rubbed off the rough edges of the streets, offend your sense of dignity? What are you trying to prove?'

He started up the engine and revved it savagely. His foot lifted as Brett leaned into the car: 'What about you, Danny?'

'What about me?' Danny asked bitterly.

'At least admit the possibility - this little shooting charade proved nothing.'

Danny's hands gripped the wheel tighdy. TSTot to you, maybe, but plenty to me. I happen to know the guy. He's my friend, all that's left of me and the streets I came from, of the way things were with me. And no one's telling me he's a killer. Get it - no one !'

Brett made a last effort. *You must know you can't go back to the way things were. It's pure sentiment because things were never that way in the first place. Surely you must see that.'

For a reply he received a stare of dislike. Revving the engine again, Danny swung the Ferrari recklessly round. As he backed away from the roadside and hung momentarily on the brakes, Brett called to him, only to receive a blast of exhaust fumes and a cloud of dust in his face. Ten seconds later Danny screeched out of sight round the hairpin below.

Shaking his head with regret, Brett returned to the rocky ledge to pick up the launcher. From there the white Floride, travelling in the opposite direction to Danny, was still visible. It was speeding along the contour road that ran like a thin scar westwards, a toy car climbing deeper into the mountains.

Brett watched it until it disappeared into a road tunnel. His expression as he returned to his car would have surprised everyone but his nearest friends. His look of practised detachment had totally vanished: he looked both angry and determined.

The ruins of the old dismantled prison, crumbling walls enclosing a shell of rubble, were a grim silhouette against the afternoon sky. Two hundred feet beneath them the girl swung the Floride off the road and followed a rough track round a huge clump of boulders. On the far side she switched off the engine.

Ahead of the car a steep footpath zig-zagged up the mountainside to the plateau on which the ruins stood. Nodding at the girl, Angie jumped out and started forward. His swarthy face showed none of its former geniality as he began to climb: he looked hard, purposeful, and in some odd way professional. The girl watched him approach the summit with the same chilling smile she had worn when awaiting Sandor*s attempted assassination.

The atmosphere among the ruins was eerie. The late afternoon sun, soon to dip behind the surrounding mountain peak, threw shadows that were long and menacing. Rusted bars, still set in crumbling walls, had their grills magnified grotesquely on the rubble-strewn ground. Overhead, two hawks hung on silent wings in their search for prey. A lizard, perched on a broken wall, was catching the last of the sunhght. The silence seemed to contain the essence of all the misery that had been incarcerated there.

An alien sound sent the lizard darting for shelter. It was an off-key whistle, its tune *The Farmer in the Dell,* and soon it began to echo off the decaying walls as it drew closer. A rusted can, kicked by a boot, bounced among the rocks and rubble. A few seconds later the whisding Angie came into sight. Although his eyes were watchful, his casual movements had the assurance of

a man used to abnormal situations and confident of his ability to deal with them.

Ahead of him was a section of the ruins that still contained unbroken glass behind cell bars. The slanting sun threw a glare that made the shadows behind the decaying walls seem almost solid. His eyes flickering on the shadow, Angie swung his foot back and kicked the tin can again. As it rattled away, an expressionless voice sounded from nowhere. 'You blew it the other night, didn't you, Angie? And the big boys didn't like it at all.'

Although shutters dropped over Angie's eyes, he showed no surprise as he faced the wall. The shadow behind it seemed to move and a piece to detach itself as the expressionless voice came again.

'Maybe the contract's too big for you, Angie.'

Angie's voice was as flat as his tormentor's. 'Think so?'

A man stepped out from behind the wall. The slanting sunlight fell on the face of Ben McBride. His weary, suffering expression was missing. He looked compact and deadly.

'The big boys think you might have lost your touch. I'm beginning to wonder myself.'

Angie's face writhed in sudden dislike. Snatching a hidden revolver from his belt, his movement a blur of speed, he spun round and opened fire on the tin can. Ben watched in fascination as the can leapt and bounced to the smash of bullets. As he pumped in the shots Angie was laughing, a crazy, killer's laugh. When the fusillade echoed away, he turned back to Ben, his eyes glittering with a psychopath's pride.

‘You can tell 'em differently, can't you, Ben? You can tell 'em they've got nothing to worry about.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The bedroom blinds, still drawn, were having some difficulty in keeping the early morning sunlight out of the luxurious hotel suite. A tray, containing the messy remains of breakfast, stood alongside a disarrayed bed. Danny, unshaven, wearing a pair of embroidered pyjamas, was pacing the deep-pile carpet, a telephone receiver in his hand.

'So what's the big sweat, Moe? Just tell the construction crews the loan I'm. floating is as good as money in the bank. Sure, they'll believe you. I'm guaranteeing it, aren't I?' His unshaven face broke into a grin. 'Moe, believe me, with your heart you wouldn't last a day in this place, with all these incredible chickie-babies floating around. Yeah; it's really something. What's that? Sure - we're making the date for the completion bond and that's final. Yeah; I'll keep in touch.'

His mood changed as he replaced the receiver. Looking worried and upset, he sank down on the unmade bed, rubbed the stubble of his beard and then

rolled over on his back. As he lay staring at the ceiling, a quizzical voice made him start.

'Your optimism borders on the psychopathic'

Brett was standing in the open doorway. Nattily dressed, looking fresh and debonair beside the dishevelled Danny, he was carrying a folder under his arm. He smiled as Danny sat up aggressively.

'Who asked for your opinion?'

Walking forward imperturbably, Brett drew a chair near the bed and sat facing the American. 'I see you're still suffering from a bad case of Angie.'

Danny's scowl deepened. 'How did you get in here anyway? Don't you lords get some kind of upbringing that teaches you to knock doors and not people?'

Temper,' Brett chided.

Danny flopped back moodily on his bed. 'Why doesn't that conniving old fool Fulton keep his nose out of things? What do I care if some two-bit hard-timers beat the rap in his courts?'

'They're not only his courts,' Brett reminded him. They're ours too.'

He received a look of disgust. 'Ours! Since when have the fuzz and I been buddies?'

'You talk that way, but you've never cheated a man in your life.' Brett paused, then smiled. 'At least not unless he cheated you first.'

'So?'

'The judge has a strong sense of justice. He hates to see criminals who ought to be inside robbing and cheating innocent people. In some cases even murdering them.'

'Big deal I He's dedicated his lif e to doing good. But why sucker us into it?'

Brett's laugh was rueful. 'Why don't we face it? We've batted for him so far because we know he's right.'

The American's scowl was an admission in itself. 'Don't give me that cricket stuff,' he muttered. 'I'll tell you what. I'll give you twenty-five thousand bucks in cash to buy back my introduction. It's OK for you - you're already in it as far as your gizzard. You're a prime witness.'

That's right. I'm a witness that Angie's girlfriend set up that attempt on Sando/s life.'

Danny's frustrated anger began building up again. 'So it's back on Angle again. What's wrong with you? Do guys from the wrong side of the track make you nervous or something?'

'Anyone without a past makes me nervous.'

Without a past? But I've given you the guy's past. And it's good. What more do you want?'

Tm not talking about his childhood. Do you know there's no record of his being in one place longer than a few weeks for the last five years?'

Danny blinked, then rallied. 'You know something? I move around pretty good myself.'

'Perhaps you do. But I doubt if you always leave town the day after an

underworld murder is committed.'

For a moment Danny stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then he leaned forward, his voice hoarse. rWhat did you say?'

Brett tossed the folder on the bed and rose. 'Try some facts. All compiled by the judge. It's all in there - names, places and dates.'

He walked out, closing the door behind him. Danny stared down at the folder in his hand. For a moment it seemed he might hurl it away. Then, looking as if he hated himself, he opened it and began reading.

The two men were sitting over a card table before an open terrace window. Danny was wearing a casual shirt and crumpled slacks; Angle was in his pyjamas. The dressing-gown he was wearing over them was obviously expensive but in electrifyingly bad taste. Both men looked bleary-eyed and dishevelled: the card game had been long and heavy. At the other side of the suite, which was larger and even more luxurious than Danny's, a cluster of half-emptied bottles littered the top of the small private bar.

Angie was talking as he studied his cards. 'Yeah, Chicago, Pittsburgh, L.A, 'Frisco - you name it, kid, and I've been.'

Danny's reaction was almost too casual 'Since we last saw one another, your life sounds like a railroad time-schedule.'

'So it has. Long road, fast track. That's me, Tiger.'

'So you've never really settled down?'

Angie'seyes, flat, hard, and expressionless, suddenly lifted. 'So?'

Danny took quick refuge behind his cards. 'Just curious, that's all.' Then, resenting the way he was being dominated: 'What's the evil eye for?'

Angie leaned forward, a sudden grin masking his expression. 'You've got the black eight, huh?'

Danny's laugh was rueful as he threw down his cards. 'As I said. A natchel-born athlete.'

Angie stretched, yawned, and went to the terrace window. He gazed out a moment, then chuckled. 'Hey, Danny - remember that promise we made one another - the time they took Red Ackerman away on a twenty to life rap?'

Danny's face shadowed again. 'What about it?'

'Gotta be free, kid - no matter what. No man-made cages for ol' Angie. I gotta keep moving. A man stays in one place too long, he gets to be a target. He dies. Me, I get in fast, make a few quick scores, then move on.'

He turned. Danny, listening hard, was frowning down at the table. Angie's face veiled a little. 'Satisfied, Tiger? Or should I go on?'

Danny glanced up quickly. 'About what?'

Angie shrugged. 'Me, maybe. I dunno -1 keep on getting the feeling you're looking for something - like maybe I'm some two-bit *capporegime* putting the arm on the numbers runners for the Big Boys...'

Danny rose protestingly. 'Now wait a minute . . .'

A laugh and a slap across the shoulders cut him short. 'Forget it, Tiger.

Everyone's entitled to a question now and then. Listen - you know that big-shot union guy, Kyle Sandor?'

Danny gave another start. 'What about him?'

'I'll tell you what about him. His people have got a block of tickets for that special screening tonight - the Bulgarian funny - and what d'ya think? I've boosted some for us.'

Danny's eyes were widening with bewilderment. You have?'

Teah.' Angie draped his arm around Danny's shoulders as the two of them moved towards the door. 'So do me a big favour, kid. Let 'em all know the kind of buddies I've really got. Okay?'

Danny was looking as if a great weight had fallen from his shoulders. 'You want me to come with you?'

'I've just said so, haven't I? Just like the old days. You, me, and the movies. Right?'

'Right,' Danny grinned. *You bring the bubble gum and I'll buy the popcorn.'

'Deal I What say you meet me and Marissa here around seven? A little drink first and then we roll. Okay?'

They eyed one another like delighted kids. Danny's reaction was heartfelt. 'Kid, you don't know how good this makes me feel. See you around seven.'

He went out as if he were walking on air. Angie closed the door, leaned against it a moment, then turned. 'Marissa 1'

The bedroom door opened and the tall girl appeared. Her voluptuous appearance was enhanced by a revealing negligee but Angie might have been addressing a piece of furniture as he rapped out his orders.

'Contact Ben right away. He wants to play tough games -let him handle this British guy: any way he feels like. But he lays off my buddy - make sure he understands that. I'll take care of him myself. Okay?'

The girl nodded. There was the beginning of her deadly, tantalizing smile as she turned back into the bedroom for the telephone.

Sandor's handshake was like the man himself, hard, uncompromising, and sincere. His weather-beaten face was both friendly and contrite as he drew Brett into his hotel suite and poured him a drink.

'I'm sure sorry I haven't made contact before, Lord Sinclair. It was Ben who reminded me I've never said thanks for saving my life.'

Brett was taking in the ex-union boss's appearance. With his massive shoulders and forearms and his black hair sprouting through his open-necked shirt, he resembled a friendly grizzly bear as he handed a glass to the Englishman. Brett took it with a rueful shrug.

Tm afraid that was only a reprieve. They're certain to try again.'

Ben, looking small, tired and worried alongside the giant Sandor, nodded eagerly. 'That's what I keep on telling him. He's crazy to stay here. How can we protect him in this Disneyland?'

Sandor let out a snort. Clenching a massive fist, he held it out to Brett. "The art of compromise, union style, Lord Sinclairl No gloves and no Queensberry rules. In the old days we went hungry and warmed our bones over fire-barrels, fighting to make my union strong. It meant making enemies and they've tried before to gun me down both inside and outside labour. But we kept going and we won.'

'And that's when you retired?' Brett said.

Sandor nodded grimly. That's when I retired. I thought the union was safe. But now the racketeers are trying to take it over. If they do, things'!! be as bad or worse than they were in the thirties. Only I happen to know the way these hoods operate, and once I've testified before those Congressional hearings they won't have a chance.'

Before Brett could comment, Ben made another plea. ■Kyle, be sensible. Let's blow this set-up. Back in the States we can at least keep your back covered.'

'He's right, you know,' Brett pointed out.

Sandor scowled. 'Sorry, but I'm going to that Bulgarian screening tonight. They say it's great and no one's stoppin' me.' Downing his whisky, he turned towards Brett. 'Listen, Lord Sinclair - there's a contract out to kill me. That means they've a broker on the job to see it's done. So what does it matter where I go?'

'You sound as if you're resigned to it,' Brett said.

'Not resigned. But if a gang of hoods decide to bump you off, there isn't that much you can do without staying indoors all the time. And no one's making me do that.'

'Have you given Lefty Marceau a thought, Kyle?' It was the worried-looking Ben.

'What about him?'

'He could be your broker. The word's around he's retired out here some place. Remember - he was deported last year.'

'That lousy punk,' Sandor growled. 'Who does he scare? Anyway, he hasn't the brains for it.' Turning to Brett, he held out his hand again. 'Real nice meeting you, Lord Sinclair, and thanks again for your help. Now I'm going to get a piece of shut-eye. I want to be in good shape for that film tonight.'

Both men watched the massive figure stride towards his bedroom. As he vanished inside, Ben gave a worried sigh. 'What d'you do with a guy like that?'

Brett was examining his worried face. *He shouldn't go to see that film. It's far too dangerous.'

"He knows that. I know that. But how do I keep him away?'

'Couldn't you try a Mickey Finn in his whisky?'

Ben was in no mood for jokes. 'Great. And who would take care of him tomorrow?' He reflected gloomily for a moment, then seemed to pull himself together. 'Glad you could make it here and meet Kyle. Is there anything else

we can do for you?'

Smiling quizzically, Brett moved towards the door. 'No, thank you. You've done enough. Bye for now.'

For a moment Ben's eyes narrowed suspiciously as the Englishman went out. Then shaking his head as if reassuring himself, he turned towards Sandor's room.

Danny's voice was hoarse as he slammed the folder down in front of the judge. 'For me that's it. Enough's enough 1'

The two men were facing one another across the desk in the judge's villa. Danny was standing, the judge sitting. The American was tight-lipped with anger as he leaned forward. 'You and the pursuit of truth . . . The truth here is that you're dead wrong about the details in that folder. But nothing on earth will make you admit it.'

The judge looked coldly imperturbable. 'Evidently you know something that has escaped me.'

"You're right I do. Did you ever hear of a hitman working out in the open - like going to a movie with his victim?'

'It sounds improbable, I agree. But...'

'ImprobableI' Danny snarled. 'It's impossible. And you know it.'

Fulton shook his head. 'No. He might simply be more clever than most. At least admit the possibility.'

Danny's fist, slamming down on the desk, made a wire tray jump. 'I keep on telling you that Angie's clean. I know the guy better than anyone and I guarantee it. So pull Brett off him and leave him alone.'

The judge's eyes did not drop. 'Brett does as he wishes -I shan't interfere. And Brett doesn't have the confidence in him that you have.'

The American swallowed tightly. TTou listen to Brett but not to me - the guy that grew up with him . . . All right -that's it. You and me are through - no matter what tricky deals you come up with. From now on you keep off my back.'

There was finality in his every movement as he walked stiff-legged towards the door. The judge showed his concern as the door slammed with an impact that made the wire tray rattle again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The bronze Aston-Martin nosed slowly along the busy waterfront. In the harbour fishing boats were discharging their catches. On the quayside chattering women in black blouses gutted fish on long trestle tables. Seagulls swept overhead or fought greedily for offal. Alongside the tables sun-weathered men, some stripped to the waist, hoisted crates on to waiting lorries. The pound of two-stroke diesels made a rhythmical background to the

clank of cranes and the revving of lorry engines. Although only a few miles away in distance, the waterfront was a thousand miles in appearance from the sophisticated, palm-fringed esplanades of Cannes.

Brett, driving the Aston-Martin, was examining the sleezy estaminets that backed the waterfront. Fishermen and labourers, sipping pastis, sprawled at tables outside them. Dogs and cats nosed up and down the cobblestones for scraps. Forced by the configuration of the waterfront to make a detour, Brett turned into the warren of streets behind it.

Here the closeness of the old buildings kept out the bright Mediterranean sunlight. A few tourists could be seen, edging along the narrow pavements and peering curiously into the old-world shops; otherwise the district appeared reserved for fishermen, workmen, and their black-shawled wives.

Brett drove past chandleries and cafes, drew up twice on the pavement to make room for heavy lorries, and finally came in sight of the sea again. The waterfront was narrower and the cafes even sleezier than on the western side. Working his way past parked lorries, Brett saw a group of drivers sitting round a table outside a dingy saloon called Cafe La Gata. Nodding his satisfaction he parked the Aston-Martin behind a lorry, picked his way through the tables, and pushed aside a bead curtain that led inside.

For a moment the switch from bright sunlight to heavy shadow dazzled him, then he saw he had entered a large saloon flanked by wooden tables and benches. The bar, backed by old-fashioned mirrors and brass fittings, stood across one end; across the other was a line of pin-tables. The decor was buccaneer - paintings of pirates, men-of-war and palm-covered islands covered the walls, with a selection of cutlasses, muskets and daggers hanging between them. A skull with an electric light burning inside it stood on a large metal-bound chest behind the bar. The effect was sleezy and in atrocious taste.

Four men were playing the pin-tables when Brett entered; another dozen or more were drinking at the surroimding table. The only woman present was behind the bar - a handsome woman with long black hair and dusky skin. A low-cut blouse and large golden earrings added to her gypsy appearance.

The hum of conversation stopped dead as Brett appeared, all faces turning on the elegant figure in a black blazer, white roll-neck sweater, white flannels and linen shoes. Pushing through their hostile wall of eyes Brett made his way to the bar. The woman put her bare arms on the counter and waited for him. Her eyes, as black as plums, betrayed her silent approval as he smiled at her.

'Madame La Gata?'

The shrug of her bare shoulders said clearly that her admiration in no way affected her sense of caution. Her voice was throaty and full of sex. 'Perhaps. But why do you ask?'

Brett made certain the men behind him could not overhear. There's some information I need. And I'm told you know everyone in these parts.'

Again her shrug. 'I might, monsieur. On the other hand I might not,'

Brett glanced back, then pulling a wad of notes from his wallet he laid them

on the counter so that his body screened them. 'I was told money might help matters along.'

Her shapely lips twisted into a predatory smile as she stared down at the notes. ⌜Who do you want me to kill?' she asked mockingly.

'I want to know where I can find Lefty Marceau.'

Her eyes were fixed on the money. 'That's all?'

That's all.'

She shrugged and reached for the notes. A moment later she gave a gasp and jerked back as a knife drove into the counter a few inches from her hand. Spinning round, Brett found a small, wiry man standing alongside him. Swarthy, thin-faced, with a scar down one cheek, he was a sinister figure as he reached forward and took the notes. The grin he gave Brett was humourless.

'You want me - you've got me. Lefty Marceau. And you're right on time.'

Four tough-looking flank men were standing right behind him. Conscious he had only seconds to work in, Brett let his shoulders drop as if he were surrendering. Then, in almost the same movement, he grabbed Marceau, heaved him bodily at the four men and dived through the gap for the doorway. He had almost reached it when a foot jabbed out from a table and tripped him. Instandy he was swamped by kicking, punching men.

It was a fight too uneven to last long. Brett managed to fling one man off and sent another crashing over a table, holding his face. But Marceau had grabbed a botde and was stealing up behind him. As the Englishman made a last desperate attempt to reach the sunlit curtain of beads that covered the entrance, he heard the woman give a warning scream. Before he could turn, the sunlight went out as if a switch had been thrown, and he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Humming to himself Danny tapped on the door of Angie's suite. Marissa opened it. Danny gave a whistle as his eyes ran over her. She was wearing a sheathlike, low-cut evening dress that revealed every curve of her superb figure. Acknowledging his admiration with her tantalizing smile, she nodded at one of the easy chairs. As he sank into it she moved provocatively towards the small private bar and picked up a cocktail shaker.

The door into the bathroom was ajar and Danny could hear the sound of the shower. A loud shout came over it. 'Is that you, kid?'

'That's right/ Danny said, grinning.

'Be right out, Tiger. Marissa, build my buddy a drink.'

Marissa was already pouring Danny a martini from the ice-packed cocktail shaker. Crossing the floor, she handed the drink to him. He watched the swing of her hips with admiration as she returned to the bar and poured one for herself. As she turned, he raised his glass and grinned,

'Well, here's to the end of the unnecessary small talk.'

Her smile came again as she raised her own glass. Taking a sip, she watched him from beneath her dark lashes. He tasted the martini, gave an appreciative nod, and tilted the glass again. 'You build 'em good. This is really something.'

She glanced meaningfully at the doorway of the empty bedroom and began

moving towards him. He watched the sway of her voluptuous body with uneasy fascination. Tou know something else? Whoever made you - they must have run out of bones.'

Putting a finger to her lips she leaned over him, her hair brushing against his face. With a nervous glance at the bedroom door, Danny took another quick sip of martini. The sound of the shower seemed to be growing louder, a waterfall rushing in his ears.

'Take it easy, kid,' he muttered. Tou're Angle's girl'

Shaking her head, she stood back and pirouetted before him. Her hair seemed to cascade slowly down and swirl round her shoulders like water. Danny tried to rise and fell back. His cry for help had a slurred sound.

'Hey, Angie ... Angie ...'

The room was blurring, sharpening and distorting like a faulty fdm. Time lost its meaning for Danny: a second, a year later, a figure wearing a tuxedo came through the bedroom door. It was carrying an airline sling-bag which it handed to Marissa. As Danny's eyes focused for a moment he saw her eager expression. Angie, the figure alongside her, turned and gave a sympathetic grin. His voice had the sepulchral slowness of a sound-track breaking down.

'Soorrrrryyyy... paaallllll...'

With an immense effort Danny tipped himself from his chair. The open french windows to the terrace were close by: he grabbed one and tried to pull himself to his feet. The effort was too much: he fell back on the carpet. As he lay there the window curtains, blowing in the evening breeze, formed and re-formed clouds over his head.

A laugh, shrill and crazy, stabbed him. Marissa's distorted face swam into his vision. It was followed a moment later by a face Danny barely recognized. Angie's eyes were cold and ruthless as they calculated his condition.

Marissa's laugh gave way to a new sound: a rhythmical throbbing that beat in Danny's head like a bass drum. Angie's face blurred and turned into a balloon that floated up among the cloud curtains. It grew larger and larger until the room seemed no longer able to contain it. Then it burst, and the darkness that radiated from the explosion brought oblivion to the drugged American.

* * *

The white Floride, with Marissa at the wheel, slipped easily through the busy Cannes streets. Neon lights flashed against the velvet night sky. The pavements were packed, the crowds silhouetted black against the brightly-lit shop windows. Queues moved eagerly into theatres whose posters and illuminations advertised movies in a dozen languages.

The girl steered her car expertly through the traffic. The sling-bag Angie had given her was resting on the passenger seat. Her expression as she glanced at her watch suggested all was going well and that she was pleased with herself.

She turned from the brilfiantly-iUurninated road into a side street and parked near a small but popular theatre. As an attendant opened the car door she leaned over for the sling-bag and carried it up the steps with her.

The foyer was well filled and the girl had to wait for the attention of the receptionist. On her right, half-hidden behind a tobacco and candy stall, Ben and one of Sandor's guards were taking close stock of the scene. A gendarme was also present: on hearing Sandor was visiting the theatre the French police had made their cautious gesture. Marissa's eyes touched Ben for a moment but no sign of recognition entered them.

'Your ticket, please, mademoiselle.'

The receptionist, wearing evening dress, was holding out his hand. The girl gave him a smile, reached into the sling-bag and drew out her invitation card. Running his eyes admiringly over her, the man checked the ticket and handed it back. Without a sideward glance the girl followed a middle-aged couple towards the left-side entrance. Pausing there as if waiting for someone she presently helped herself to a cigarette. As she flicked on her lighter the huge figure of Kyle Sandor entered the foyer, accompanied by his second bodyguard. With the lighter still burning in her hand the girl watched the three men close protectingly around the ex-union boss while-he made towards the stall for cigars. Giving her chilling smile of anticipation, Marissa lit her cigarette and blew out the flame in a gesture that was almost symbolic.

CHAPTER SIX

Brett opened his eyes, lifted his head and winced. He waited a full sixty seconds before trying again and this time managed to stagger to his feet. Holding his head, supporting himself against a wall, he took stock of his surroundings.

Stone walls surrounded him on four sides. The floor was of flagstones and the roof was heavily timbered. A long shelf festooned with cobwebs and laden with old chests ran along the opposite walL The floor was littered with haphazard items of marine equipment - nets, kegs, crates, packs of sailcloth, oildrums: supplies that convinced Brett he was imprisoned in an old chandlery.

Still feeling his head gingerly, he approached the heavy wooden door. For a latch it had a huge metal hasp with a massive iron ring. Lower down was a large mortice lock, and peering through the keyhole he caught a glimpse of arched walls composing a corridor that led to a second door. Although this door was a few inches ajar, the two armed and heavy-jowled men sitting on the steps that ran up to it made Brett shrug and turn away.

He moved towards the single, barred window in the opposite wall. To reach it he had to climb on a crate. Through the bars he had a view down a narrow alley where a further two of Marceau's men were standing guard. The long,

slanting shadows told Brett it was nearly sunset.

Discouraged by the thorough security measures he jumped down from the crate and began rummaging around the shadowy room. Dust rose in clouds as he pulled aside bales of sailcloth and nets. A large sea chest in the far corner of the room, flanked by piles of dusty sacks, drew his attentioa Although its hasp was unlocked, the hinges of the lid were rusted and it took all Brett's strength to force it back. Rummaging inside, he pulled out a pulley reduction rig complete with a dozen or so rollers. He was about to drop it and continue his search when he gave a start and examined it more closely. Laying it over the lid of the chest, he began pulling aside casks and bales of sailcloth with more urgency. As he worked, a rope-end caught his eye. Snatching it up and pulling, he discovered it belonged to a coil hidden beneath a pile of sacks. As he turned to glance up at the barred window there was hope on his face again.

Cigarette in hand, Marissa stood waiting alongside the aisle entrance. On the left side was an ornate statue on a pedestal and on the floor alongside it a sandbox ashtray. Farther along the wall was the door to the men's room. On the other side of the entrance an arch and steps ran up to the projection booth.

After another minute the girl began to show impatience. Bending down to extinguish her cigarette she casually allowed her slihg-bag to drop between the statue and the wall. Giving a swift but casual glance over her shoulder, she pushed it out of sight, A moment later she walked coolly into the lighted theatre and down the aisle. As she paused, checking the number of her ticket, a voice sounded behind her.

‘Excuse me, lady. Can I help you?'

It was Ben, looking earnest and well-meaning. The girl gave him a stare, then held out her ticket. Ben led her back a couple of rows and pointed to the third seat on the centre block. As the girl took it, Ben turned and waved his hand.

Sandor, flanked front and back by his two guards, came down the aisle. The theatre was filling rapidly now and his party drew considerable attention from the settling guests. Ben pointed at the row of seats directly in front of Marissa, and the first guard took the third seat from the aisle. As Ben motioned Sandor to the second seat, the ex-union boss shook his head and took the outer one. Ben showed immediate concern.

'No, Kyle. That's mine.'

Sandor grinned up at him. 'What's the fuss? I like the aisle seat.'

Ben tugged anxiously at his arm. 'Have you gone crazy? You're wide open on this side.'

Shrugging philosophically, Sandor rose and dropped into the inner seat. Grumbling, Ben sank down beside him. Tou want me to die of heart failure or something? They ain't going to get you without going through me first. No, sir, they're not.'

'Will you settle down and relax?' Sandor asked impatiently.

In the booth at the rear of the theatre the two film projectors were loaded and ready. Each projector faced two small glass windows, one to emit the beam, the other for the use of the operator. Reel one was loaded in the left-hand projector whose carbon arc window was open and lit.

The operator, a middle-aged man with shirtsleeves rolled up over tattooed arms, was taking a preliminary glance through the left-hand porthole window. Although his eyes were fixed on the curtain that was beginning to roll back, if they had moved downwards he would have seen that Marissa's back and head almost screened Sandor from his view. The ex-union boss was as neatly screened from other angles of the theatre by Ben and the two guards.

The projectionist drew back, turned up the spluttering carbon in projector one and slammed the window closed. At the same time he hit the house dimmer switch and be gan taking up the ride of the sound track with bored expertise.

On the theatre floor Sandor settled back contentedly as the house lights dimmed. The film, a Bulgarian-type Western, had already established a reputation for action-packed, outrageous comedy, and as the screen suddenly erupted in a pounding of hooves, wild Slavonic yells, and the background strumming of balalaikas, it was obvious the audience shared Sander's expectations.

With such interest in the film, no one noticed the movements of the girl in the row behind Sandor. As the titles came on the screen she lifted an arm to gaze at her watch. What she saw appeared to satisfy her, for she sank back in her seat contentedly. The reflection of the light on her face showed she was once again smiling her chilling smile of expectation.

Panting, covered with dust and cobwebs, Brett stood back to examine his handiwork. A complex of ropes ran from the huge iron ring in the door to the bars of the window. Halfway along their length the ropes ran through and around the pulley reduction rig which was suspended in mid-air by the tautness of the tackle. With its clever use of reduction dynamics, it was the kind of rigging only an inventive and experienced yachtsman could have devised.

The shadows, growing denser in the corners of the basement, renewed Brett's sense of urgency. Wiping his hands, he stepped forward and took hold of the centre rope. A deep breath and he braced himself and tugged.

Behind him the metal ring strained at its moorings. The pulleys of the tackle creaked and the winched ropes drew tauter, but nothing gave. Drawing an arm across his forehead, Brett braced himself again. This time a piece of cement loosened on the rock ledging into which the window bars were embedded and fell to the stone floor.

Heartened, Brett gathered himself for a supreme effort. Sweat stood out on his face and his shoulders cracked with the strain as he heaved. The pulleys creaked and more cement fell to the flagstones. Then, with a suddenness that

sent Brett sprawling, the window bars tore away and brought a three-foot section of the wall tumbling inside with them. A cloud of cement dust rose and half-hid the gaping hole in the wall.

In the corridor outside there were alarmed shouts as the two guards heard the loud crash of masonry. Guns in hand, they ran towards the door. Regaining his feet, Brett jumped to one side and waited as the men lifted the heavy restraining bar. A moment later the door swung back. Seeing the gaping hole in the wall, both guards assumed Brett had escaped through it and ran forward. Taking a few steps with them, Brett threw a large fishing net into the air. The guards' forward rush drove them into it and they collapsed in a tangle of legs and arms. Before the guards in the alley could climb up to the shattered window to find out what was happening, Brett ran outside, slammed the stout door to prevent either of the entangled guards taking a shot at him, and sprinted hard down the corridor.

The boisterous noise of the Bulgarian film and the uninhibited laughter of the audience were loud when Angie pushed open the glass swing-doors and stood swaying slightly inside the foyer. The gendarme, who was enjoying the movie from the left-side aisle entrance, turned guiltily and approached the American as he fumbled in his pocket and offered his ticket to the attendant. Angie gave the gendarme a bright smile as the attendant handed the ticket back to him.

'Sounds a great show, officer. Pity I've missed some of it.' The gendarme ran a professional eye over Angie's close-fitting tuxedo and decided there was nothing to fear from this happy, inebriated American. 'It only started five minutes ago, m'sieur. You have not missed very much.'

'I haven't? Great. Then I reckon I can spare a couple more minutes to make myself comfortable. See you. Bonne chance.'

With a wink, Angie made an unsteady beeline for the men's room. With a grin and a Gallic shrug at the attendant, the gendarme moved back to the aisle entrance. Thirty feet ahead of him Sandor and his party were enjoying themselves like kids at a school outing. Even Ben and the girl were smiling at the preposterous antics on the screen. The gendarme, a lover of slapstick comedies, had forgotten about Angie within seconds of returning to his vantage point.

A couple of minutes later the door of the men's room opened. From it Angie could see the attendant was talking to the pretty girl in the cigarette kiosk and the gendarme had moved a few feet inside the aisle. Walking unsteadily but unobtrusively forward, Angie reached the entrance without either the girl or the attendant noticing him. With the gendarme lost in the film, the American was able to survey the audience with a cool, detached efficiency. Locating Sandor and his party, he leaned down to crush out his cigarette in the sandtray. With a quick glance behind him, he reached into the hidden sling-bag and pulled out a P38 target special, fitted with a silencer. Stuffing the pistol in his belt he straightened, edged across the entrance, and vanished up

the steps that led to the projection booth.

He was now out of sight of the foyer and on a bend in the steps he paused to check the pistol was loaded and the silencer screwed on tightly. Seeing he was dead on time, he began to count the seconds mentally as he continued up the steps to the booth.

The operator was watching the left-hand projector as the reel began to run out. Stepping past a pile of film cans, he moved to the right-hand projector and adjusted its arc. Busy as he was, he did not notice the door behind him open and Angie slip quietly inside. The din from the film track was more than enough to deaden the American's footsteps as he crept forward, the pistol inverted in his hand.

The operator switched off the carbon arc of the left-hand machine as the right-hand one took over. The dying reel ran out and began flipping over on the take-up sprockets. The operator reached out his hairy, tattooed hand for the kill button and pressed it. It was the signal for Angie to swing the gun butt down.

The stunned man fell heavily, scattering the pile of cans, but the din of the film track covered the clatter. Angie bent down and examined him with professional care before dragging him to one side. Straightening, he moved past the dead left-hand projector and stared with cold eyes through the observation window.

There was enough reflected light from the screen for him to detect Sandoi^s guards and Ben. Marissa's shapely head was still partly screening Sandor from view. Although the girl was finding the film as fascinating as the rest of the audience she had not forgotten her role. As Angie watched her from the darkened window she lifted her wristwatch to check the time again. Ten seconds later she rose and edged her way to the aisle. Angie's eyes did not follow her: they were staring exultantly at the gap she had left. Through it Sandor"s head and shoulders presented a near-perfect target.

Fumbling beneath his tuxedo, Angie pulled out a screwdriver and started work on the porthole-type window. As he worked coolly Marissa passed the gendarme at the entrance of the aisle who raised his hand in an admiring salute. A moment later the attendant opened the glass doors of the foyer and the girl was in the street and walking swifdy towards her car.

Back in the booth Angie had removed the window frame ıand laid it aside. Reaching back to the sound-track control, he pushed up the gain handle a couple of notches. The cacophony of banging guns and squawking animals grew even louder. Pulling the target pistol from his belt, Angie manoeuvred himself into position and laid the barrel of the pistol on the window frame. Out in the audience Sandor was slapping his knee in his delight at the outrageous slapstick. Staring down the sights with cold precision, Angie waited for his target to hold steady.

Engine revving, brakes screaming, Brett's Aston-Martin was swerving in and out of the Cannes evening traffic as if the other cars were stationary. A gendarme leapt on to the road as the DB5 screamed past, his whistle shrilling vainly. A police car let out a startled wail and tried to follow but lost it in seconds.

Lighted shop windows and neon-lit cinemas blurred past the sweating Brett. He saw the side street he wanted too late and had to do a tight U-turn, missing an oncoming car by a few feet. Swinging into the street and jamming on his brakes, his tyres burning rubber, he caught a glimpse of Marissa's white Floride pulling away. The sight added to his urgency. Leaping out of the Aston-Martin, he ran up the steps of the cinema and burst into the foyer.

Seeing his dusty, dishevelled appearance, the startled attendant ran forward. Brushing him aside Brett ran for the aisle entrance. The gendarme, who had convinced himself the last of the guests had arrived, had advanced a few more steps into the theatre, and from behind him Brett was able to take quick stock of the situation. He spotted the huge Sandor almost immediately and the telltale gap in the seat behind him. Following the angle he glanced back and saw the darkened observation window.

One glance was enough. As he spun round, the attendant appeared in the aisle doorway and shouted for the gendarme. With both men grabbing at him Brett burst out into the foyer, saw the projection-booth steps, and ran for them. As he reached the bend in the steps he felt his jacket grabbed. Twisting round, he drove a foot into the gendarme's chest and sent him toppling back. In the same movement he ran up the remaining flight of steps.

Inside the booth Angie was taking his cool, methodical time. A line along the sights of his pistol showed that Sandor was motionless again, his fascinated eyes glued to the screen. Making himself comfortable, Angie drew in a steady breath, held it, and began to squeeze the trigger.

The booth door crashed open. Seeing his man, Brett took a headlong dive and struck Angie a split-second before he fired. The bullet went up harmlessly into the roof as Sandor, oblivious of bis near escape, began rocking with laughter again.

With Brett hanging grimly on to Angie's gun arm, the two men rolled over and over on the floor. The clatter of film cans was drowned by the din outside. As they crashed into the foot of a projector, Angie broke free and levelled the pistol at Brett. A desperate upward kick from the Englishman deflected his arm and spun him round. Brett came up fast but Angie's recovery had the speed and urgency of a trapped animal. A vicious backhand swing of the pistol sent Brett to the floor stunned and helpless. His face distorted, Angie raised the pistol to shoot, then heard the clatter of footsteps on the steps outside. Pressing himself against the wall behind the door, he waited.

Revolver in hand the gendarme burst into the room, followed by the attendant. Seeing the unconscious projectionist in a corner of the booth and

Brett struggling to regain his feet, the gendarme covered him with the revolver.

'You! You're under arrest!'

Angie saw his chance and took it. As the half-dazed Brett tried to draw the two men's attention to him, he slipped out through the door and vanished.

The face floating over Danny was blurred. Blinking hard the drugged American tried again. This time the face came into focus for a moment and he saw it belonged to Angie. Only there was a difference. It was glistening with sweat and almost wolfish in appearance. As the details faded again, Danny heard the sound of heavy breathing.

Telling himself it was delirium and would soon pass, Danny tried to sit up. As he failed and lurched back, Angie grabbed his shoulder.

'Hey there, Tiger. You know something? I've done a bad thing.'

Danny squinted up painfully. 'Angie ... What's the matter with me? What's happened? ...'

For a moment Angie's voice was bitter. 'Long road, fast track, kid. Looks like the end of the race for me.'

The fog around Danny receded again and he caught sight of the sniper's pistol in Angie's hand. What's the artillery for?'

Angie held up the revolver. 'You're sayin' you don't know?'

The truth hit Danny like a kick in the stomach. TTouI And Sandor I ... You mean Brett and the judge were right?'

Angie's eyes were hard and desperate. 'First failure, kid. Never missed a contract before.'

Danny was looking violently sick. *You telling me that's what you've been doing all these years? You've been a hitman?'

Angie was not listening as he threw a glance at the trench windows. They're closing in on me, kid. I've gotta fade fast.'

Danny tried to turn away. 'Go away. I don't know you.'

Angie grabbed his shoulder and jerked him round. 'Now listen, kid, please. You remember that promise we once made? I'm holding you to it - just in case.'

'Promise?' Danny muttered. 'What are you talking about?'

Angle's expression distorted. Grabbing Danny's hair viciously, he drew his face close to his own. 'Don't give me you don't remember 1 Our promise! Keep it in mind 1'

Throwing Danny back on the carpet he ran out of the room. Fighting blackness and a retching stomach, Danny tried to fix the position of the door and began crawling towards it. His inner torture, the fart he now remembered his promise, drove him on. At the door he had to fight back another wave of nausea before dragging himself upright by the handle. His agonized face betrayed his effort of will as he fought off the effects of the drug and staggered out into the corridor.

Downstairs, Angie, who had taken a side door out of the hotel, was crouched behind a clump of shrubbery at one side of die illuminated crescent forecourt. At the far side of it he could see Danny's car and he was wondering whether the key was still in it or in Danny's pocket upstairs. As he debated whedier he dared waste the time to find out, a white car drove into the crescent and parked behind the Ferrari. Angie gave a start of relief and emerged from the dark shrubbery.

'Marissal'

The girl, about to switch off the ignition, turned as he ran across the crescent. His voice was fierce as he yanked open the door.

'What took you so long to get here?'

She gave him a surprised smile but he saw her hand was sliding towards the dashboard locker where he knew an 1automatic pistol was hidden. Cursing, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her from the car. 'No, you don't! You're going to phone Ben and say I still want the money. Tell him if he doesn't pay, I'm blowing everything. So he'd better move.'

Pushing her away he jumped into the Floride, slammed it into reverse to clear Danny's car, and then shot forward, It was the moment Danny chose to come out of the brightly-lit hotel and lurch on to the forecourt. Seeing him Angie narrowed his eyes, then came to a decision. With engine revving and tyres screaming for traction, the Floride leapt forward like a tiger making a kill.

The dazed Danny saw the brilliant headlights leaping at him from the darkness and threw out his hands to protect himself. His eyes squinted painfully and helplessly at the oncoming glare. Behind the windshield Angie's face was like a death's head as he slammed into a higher gear.

The headlights were only feet from Danny when his danger burned die fog from his mind and he hurled himself sideways. The Floride screeched murderously past, its tyres clipping the edge of the pavement. Three seconds later it plunged on to the highway and vanished.

Danny climbed to his feet, steadied himself, then ran for his car. The shock had done more than clear his mind: outraged anger showed in his every movement as he slammed the door and switched on the ignition. Kicking the Ferrari into throaty life he swung out on the highway and went after Angie like an avenging Nemesis.

A trouser suit was rammed hastily into the open suitcase that lay on the bed in Angie's suite. Marissa ran back to the dressing-table for underwear. Her frozen calm and smile had vanished: she was clearly in a great hurry to be gone and finished with Angie. As she threw another handful of lingerie into the suitcase, a faint sound from the living-room made her start and turn.

The low click that followed sounded like a door closing. Checking her breathing, the girl listened a moment, then moved to the open bedroom door. Only her eyes moved as she stood there and they could see nothing suspicious

in the empty room. After thirty seconds she took a step forward, to stop dead as an arm suddenly shot across the doorway.

Brett, his black blazer torn and dust-stained, stepped into view. After one quick glance at him she stared straight ahead, her lovely face pale but expressionless. Brett's voice expressed his aversion of her.

TTou're no great talker, are you? Watching seems to be your preference. Watching men playing deadly games and destroying one another.'

The sideward slide of her eyes, assessing her chances of escape, was her only reaction. Brett was watching her as if she were a beautiful, poisonous insect.

Tou should be pleased to see me. I've got a new game for you.'

Again he received a quick, expressionless glance.

You're going to help me,' he said. 'To stop a man from killing his friend.'

She smiled at the empty room as if listening to a joke. Face grim, Brett grabbed her shoulders and swung her towards him.

'It might not appeal to your streak of sadism but it's a game you'd better play. Because if you don't you're going to spend a long time regretting it. I want to know where Angie's gone. And it had better be the truth.'

For a moment she looked almost surprised. Then he received the full wash of her deadly, chilling smile.

CHAPTER EIGHT

High in the mountains the pre-dawn air was chilly. The full moon threw a hard gloss on the peaks and gave a knife edge to the shadows. The ruins of the old prison stood in black silhouette against the milky sky.

Angie swung the Floride into the clearing, cut the ignition and doused the lights. Pistol in hand, he ran a few yards up the mountain path until he could see the road below. Although sweat-stained and breathing hard, he was showing the psychopath's fascination with hunting and death as he watched the headlights of Danny's car weaving from side to side up the hairpins. Tucking the revolver in his belt, he began climbing the steep path.

Danny swung in alongside the Floride. Jumping out he crouched in the Ferrari's shadow for a moment, then ran across to the white car. The moonlight showed the seats were empty. Fumbling about to see what he could find the American opened the glove compartment. Pulling out his hand, he stared at the automatic pistol it was holding. For a moment his expression betrayed the war inside him. Then his face hardened and he began climbing the path to the ruins.

The silence was deathlike. Pebbles, displaced by his climb, clinked sharply in the chilly air and he found himself pausing every few seconds to listen. The mountainside appeared empty of life and yet the huge boulders and their black shadows could have hidden a hundred men.

The path became less steep as it neared the rim of the rocky plateau. Crouching behind a rock, Danny panned the scene ahead. Moonlight frosted the edges of crumbling 1walls. Jet-black shadows hugged the ground and lay solid in ditches. The silvered mountain peaks to the east seemed to isolate the plateau in its desolation. From somewhere close by a night bird let out a jagged cry. The silence that followed was like a knife point at the throat.

The nearest wall was a full thirty yards away. Bracing himself, bending almost double, Danny ran for it. Expecting a pistol shot at any moment, he imagined the scrabble of his feet could be heard fifty miles away. But he reached the wall without incident and flattened in its shadow. The moss-covered stone felt icy through his shirt. Heart hammering, he paused to regain his breath, then began edging sideways.

He knew the wall was on the perimeter of the old prison. Fifty feet beyond it was a labyrinth of crumbled walls and rubble-filled ditches. Angie would be hiding in there somewhere; Danny's problem was to cross the open moonlight without drawing a bullet,

Ahead of him a spill of moonlight betrayed a gap in the wall. Edging up to it he peered round. The open area, once the prison yard, was empty of cover but to his left the ground was broken by a ditch that disappeared among the ruins. He guessed it was an old sewer whose sides had collapsed when the flagstones had been taken up.

He wondered if it were deep enough to provide him with cover or whether rubble would force him to the surface and make him a sitting duck for Angie. The silence seemed to mock him. He had made himself into the hunter and by stopping here Angie had surely accepted the role of the hunted. To hesitate now might reverse the roles. And that could be fatal.

He peered again through the gap. The ditch was perhaps ten yards away. Feeling himself sweating in spite of the chilly morning air, Danny pushed himself through the gap and ran.

Bricks took the skin off his knees as he dived into the one-time sewer. As the pain eased, doubts began to nag him. Why had Angie not fired? No one as experienced as he could have left the gaps in the outer walls uncovered.

Could it mean he had been fooled: that somehow Angie had doubled back and reached his car? The thought made him start; then he dismissed it. There was only one path down to the cars and until a few seconds ago he had enjoyed a clear view of its approach. And he had not heard an engine start up. Whatever his reasons for not firing, Angie must still be hiding among the ruins.

He started forward. For the first few yards, by bending double, he was able to keep below the rim of the sewer. Then, as drifts of rubble appeared, he was compelled to flatten and crawl. The broken bricks abrased his elbows and knees and dug painfully into his body. One pile, completely filling the ditch, forced him to jump out and run over it, but still no shot tore out from the ruins ahead. Taking risks now, he crouched and ran the last fifteen yards and flung

himself behind a half-collapsed wall.

Drenched in sweat he lay listening. For a moment the only sound was the pounding of blood in bis ears. Then the tinkle of a pebble made him start A low laugh followed a few seconds later. He flattened against the wall, his whisper tight and sharp.

'Angie! Is that you?'

This time the laugh sounded half-crazed and exultant. Tliya, Tiger 1 This is great. Just Like old times, huh?'

There was the sound of running feet and the rattle of shale. Then the half-crazed voice again. 'Cowboys and Indians, kid. Remember? Just you an' me.'

Danny's sudden flashback added to the nightmare. Two twelve-year-old boys playing the age-old game among the rubble of back-alley tenements . . , With cap pistols and home-made bows and arrows . . . For a moment the silver moonlight and jet-black shadows turned unreaL

'Angie, give it up. You can't win, no matter what happens here.'

‘You're wrong, Tiger. There's only you in my way. And you can't lick old Angie. You never could.'

To the left of Danny a twenty-foot length of wall had collapsed inwards in a pile of rubble. Keeping his head down, Danny edged towards it. As he leapt across a small broken section a bullet smacked into the side of the wall and ricocheted shrilly away. The moonlight showed Danny's anguish and resolve as he crept on. The preliminaries were over; the game was on in earnest now.

He reached the wide gap and without pausing for thought dived for the cover of the rubble. A second bullet kicked powdered brick at him as he burrowed for cover. Angie's voice mocked him again. 'Bang, bang, Tiger! You're dead.'

The childish expression, with all its connotations, brought a shudder from the sweating Danny. Cautiously he raised his head. The effect of the moonlight shining through barred windows was dazzling and it took his eyes time to adjust. Forty feet ahead of him was a long wall with a fifteen-foot gap that offered a freak view of the distant mountains. A lower wall abutted it on the right. The collapsed sewer ran from right to left across the moonlit rectangle and passed beneath the third wall whose almost total collapse had reduced it to litde more than a line of rubble. Beyond the rectangle the gaunt shapes of other walls rose jaggedly into the milky sky.

As Danny watched closely, he saw a hunched shadow run across the wide gap opposite to a nearer wall. Again it appeared, this time taking cover behind the wall on his right. Watching as if hypnotized, he ducked back sharply as another bullet kicked dust into his face. The laugh that followed was a mixture of amusement and derision.

*What's the matter, Tiger? Don't you want to play?'

Danny barely recognized his own voice. ʳWhy don't you cut out this fooling? If you go back to town with me and talk they might give you a break.'

'Give in, kid? You and me never did that. A winner and a loser. That's how it always was.'

This isn't a game anyone can win. Can't you see that?'

You're wrong, Tiger. But I'll tell you what. We'll switch over again. You're the cowboy and I'm the Indian. OK?'

*You're crazy,' Danny muttered. 'Give it up, Angie. Please.'

His only answer was the gunman's psychopathic laugh. As he peered across the moonlit patch at the low wall, he saw a movement behind it and braced himself. But instead of another searching bullet he saw Angie's shadowy head and shoulders appear. Gritting his teeth, he took aim but at the last moment his eyes closed and the bullet struck the wall five feet from the contemptuous Angie.

'Too bad, Tiger. But thanks. Now I know.'

Danny found he was sweating again. 'Know what?'

Angie stood upright. Tfou ain't got the belly for it, Tiger. You can't kill your old pal - no matter what he's done.'

The trick almost worked. As Danny started to rise the gunman's hand streaked up. Danny hurled himself sideways and the two shots, fired at lightning speed, blasted rock splinters into his face. Breathing hard, Danny wiped his cut face and lay motionless for a moment Then his head lifted. 'All right - that's it. Now we're going back.'

Fury at his miss choked Angie's reply. Then, pulling himself together and smiling contemptuously, he walked right into the moonlight. 'What makes you think that, Tiger?'

Danny wiped an arm again across his bleeding, sweating forehead Tve counted five shots. That means your revolver's empty.'

Grinning, Angie juggled the P38 in his hand. 'Six chambers, Tiger. Not five. Even you must know that,'

Taking a deep breath, Danny began to rise again. You're a pro, Angie. And pros always leave their hammer chambers empty.'

For a moment Angle's frustration showed again as he stared at the pistol in Danny's hand. Then he gave his half-crazed smile. 'It's a clear shot, Tiger. Do it.'

Danny shook his head. 'No more shooting. You're going back with me to stand trial. Let's go.'

Angie took another step forward almost to the edge of the ditch. 'What about our promise, kid? You ain't forgotten?'

Danny took a tighter grip of his pistoL "We're not kids any more, Angie.'

'Does a few years change things? I can't believe that'

‘You can't?' Danny asked bitterly. 'What was that trick you pulled a minute ago? Just another fun-game?'

Angie looked penitent as he let his empty revolver fall. 'Only a near miss, kid. Meant to scare you off, that's all.' Hiding his expression, he turned and pointed at a gap in the broken walls. 'See that. Ain't it something?'

Danny followed his gaze. Behind the silvered peaks a rose-tinted pennant was heralding the approach of dawn. The sight was emotive and beautiful.

It's freedom, Tiger,' Angie said softly. 'How'd you feel if they took it away from you?'

'You took the chances. So who's to blame?'

'I ain't making excuses. But supposing I promise to go straight. No more contracts. What then?'

Danny's voice betrayed his private war. "We're getting nowhere and wasting time. Let's go.'

There was a sudden laugh as Angie turned to face him. *You know something, kid? I'm leaving. Right over those walls and away.'

Danny's face paled in the moonlight. 'I'm saying no.'

Tfou say what you like, Tiger. You can't shoot me in the back and you know it.'

'Don't push me, Angie. Please don't push me.'

The gunman took half a dozen steps backwards. Danny lifted the pistol, aimed it, and faltered. Angie's lips came back in a triumphant grin. 'Get it? You can't. That's the difference between us. It always was the difference, only you could never see it. S'long, kid. Keep batting.'

With a flip of his hand he turned away. Desperate, Danny aimed at the ground at bis feet. The gunman did not even glance back as a puff of dust rose beside him. The echo of the shot mingled eerily with his contemptuous laugh. 'No good, kid. I told you - you haven't the belly for a back shot.'

Fighting himself Danny laid the sights fully on him. A few seconds later, shivering in his defeat, he let the pistol fall to his side.

CHAPTER NINE

Angie was grinning with triumph as he moved away. No problem: the game had been one-sided from the beginning. Pity the kid was still alive but there was enough time to get over the border before the real heat came on. One way and another it might have been worse.

He was making for the wide gap in the wall ahead. As he reached the large heap of rubble in front of it, a low, almost weary voice stopped him dead.

'So you blew it again, Angie. After all the warnings I gave you.'

Danny, who was turning away in defeat, heard the voice and spun round. At first he could see only Angie, a frozen figure in the moonlight. Then a hunched silhouette appeared in the gap and climbed out on the heap of rubble. It was Ben and he was carrying a vicious Schmeisser machine pistol beneath his arm. Its muzzle was aimed at a point halfway between Danny and the paralysed Angie.

The very weariness of Ben's voice added to its menace as he gazed down at Angie. 'Until now it was only you who knew I'd given you the contract. Pity

we couldn't have kept it that way.'

Angie's eyes were leaking fear. He put his hands out pleadingly. 'Don't, Ben. I won't talk. You know that.'

Ben nodded grimly. That's for sure.' His eyes shifted to Danny who was pivoting slowly in the hope of getting in a shot before the blast of the Schmeisser. 'Nor will your buddy. I'll take him first.'

With the Schmeisser swinging towards him, Danny was about to risk all and open fire when with disbelief he saw a tall figure rise from behind the collapsed wall on the left of the moonlit rectangle. It was Brett; his arm was back, and the large rock he threw struck Ben painfully on the shoulder. The blow swung the gunman off balance and was the signal for the scene to explode.

Brett dived back behind the rubble as the murderous Schmeisser swung towards him. Danny leapt forward, grabbed Angie, and yanked him backwards, for both men to sprawl in the cover of the ditch. Unable to reach Brett, Ben triggered the Schmeisser and tried to spray bullets into the old sewer. Dust leapt up from the rim, and rocks and pebbles were flung down on the prostrate men. In an effort to stop the murderous fire Danny threw up an arm and fired a couple of blind shots. They did no damage, but they forced Ben to retreat to the wall. Letting loose a final burst in Brett's direction, he slipped through the gap and took cover.

Silence returned, broken only by the heavy breathing of the four men. Lying alongside Angie, Danny could feel the gunman shaking from reaction at the nearness of his escape. As the last echoes of the Schmeisser died away, a cool voice called out from the line of rubble on his left.

'Danny!'

The American could not hide a grin. 'Hiya, El Lordo. For once it's good to see you.'

'How many are there?'

'Only one. But that spray gun evens out the odds. What do you think?'

'How's your ammunition?'

'I've a few shells left.'

'Good. Then our next step is to surround, contain and capture. I believe that's the correct military jargon.'

Danny stared along the ditch and understood. 'OK. Keep your receiver on.'

Another burst of bullets made him duck. As the firing ceased he heard a click as Ben expertly slammed a fresh clip into the Schmeisser. As Danny began crawling along in the opposite direction to Brett, Angie caught hold of his leg. 'You're not leaving me, kid? Without a gun, I ain't got a chance.'

Turning, Danny saw the gunman's swarthy face was pale with fear. Shaking him off, he began crawling again. 'Shut up and stay put. As long as he's behind that wall, you're safe enough.'

Reaching the side wall he saw the sewer, running beneath it, was only partially blocked with rubble. He worked swiftly but quietly, knowing that if

Ben heard him and crept round the corner, the game was over. When, a minute later, a wide enough opening appeared, he picked up a rock and threw it at the jagged gap ahead. The starded burst of fire told him Ben was still in position. Satisfied, he crawled beneath the wall and edged along it. As he reached the corner he heard Brett's impatient voice.

‘What are you doing, Danny? Having a sleep?'

The moonlight was beginning to pale as the dawn grew brighter. A quick glance round the corner told Danny that Ben had withdrawn a few feet from the gap and was now 1crouching behind a heap of rubble. The withdrawal spoke for itself: he was positioned to react quickly if an attack came from one or the other of his flanks. As Danny drew back, he had an idea.

'Hi, English!'

'Must you shout in that uncivilized way,' came the cool reprimand. 'They'll hear you back in Cannes.'

Danny, relaxed now he was no longer at war with an ex-friend, grinned. 'What's your lucky number at roulette?'

The Englishman was quick to understand. 'Good idea. Let's start - now I'

Ben's head was turning from side to side as he tried to guess their move. The echoes disguised Danny's new position, but he could hear Brett was still hiding behind the demolished wall and he crept back to the gap. Danny, pistol in hand, was ticking off the seconds as he hugged the corner. Brett, crouched behind a heap of bricks, was completing the count. Four... five... six...'

At seven he broke from cover and, crouching low, made a dash for the wall. As the brutal hammering of the Schmeis-ser sent bricks flying from the rubble, Danny opened fire from the corner, forcing Ben to swing round. In turn Danny had to duck back as a burst of bullets screamed off the wall.

To escape the flanking fire, Ben ran forward through the gap and dropped among the large heap of rubble. Ahead of him, Angie, thinking the gunman was fully occupied, had jumped out of the ditch and was running away from the action.

The barrel of the Schmeisser rose. Danny, peering over the low wall, saw Angie's danger and frantically pumped three shots at the gunman. The hammering blast drowned them. Angie's back arched, then he stumbled and fell. Horrified, Danny watched his hands clutch at the ground as he tried to crawl towards the wall and freedom.

Before Ben could fire again, Brett came through the gap and drove jarringly into the gunman. At the same moment Danny leapt over the wall.

Fighting like a wild animal, Ben tore free from Brett, rolled down the heap of rubble, came up on his knees, and pivoted with the Schmeisser. For an instant Brett was exposed and helpless. Danny, switching Ms run, fired at point-blank range, only to hear the click of his empty automatic Hurling it at Ben, he dived forward and knocked the machine pistol aside. In almost the same movement he threw the snarling gunman at Brett, who landed a punch that sent him sprawling and unconscious to the ground.

While Brett picked up the Schmeisser, Danny ran over to Angie. The dying gunman had managed to reach the wall but was now lying motionless at its base. Danny believed him dead and as he heard the distant wail of police sirens turned inquiringly to Brett, who nodded.

'I phoned them before leaving. I wasn't sure what the odds would be out here.'

Danny heard a low moan. Turning abrupdy, he lifted Angie's head. The man's eyes fluttered, opened, and stared blankly up at the moon-washed dawn sky. Danny had to bend lower to hear his half-delirious words.

'Gotta be that way, Tiger . . . No man makes a cage for us . . . No one puts us away. Man'd be better off dead, kid. Much better ofE...'

His head fell back in the American's arms as the police sirens closed in. Seeing Danny's expression, Brett turned sharply and walked away.

Sitting in his car and showing his concern, Brett watched Danny stumble down the mountain path and cross the small clearing. As he reached his Ferrari, Brett cleared his throat. Tou all right?'

Danny, his face smeared in blood and looking drawn and pale, turned towards him. 'Sure. And you?'

Brett's face turned expressionless. 'Yes. Why not?'

Danny's eyes wandered back to the prison ruins, now silhouetted against the dawn sky. 'Tell me something. How did you get here on time like that?'

Brett slipped the ignition key into the Aston-Martin. *You might ask Marissa. Only you'll need to get police permission first.'

The wry grin he received told him the resilient American was beginning to recover from his shock and loss. 'I hate telling you this, English, but, well, you've got style.'

Brett inclined his head. 'I have to admit your own timing was nearly perfect too.'

'Yeah. It's a good thing I remembered your lucky number is nine.'

Brett hid his start with a yawn. 'An excellent thing. Especially as it happens to be seven.'

Danny stared at him. 'You're kidding.'

'Not at all. Watch me at roulette tonight.'

The irony appeared to complete the American's restoration. 'Is that a date?'

Brett raised an indulgent eyebrow. 'If you promise to dress like a gentleman and bring a girl of some refinement, I might endure your company for an hour or two.'

Danny grinned and jumped into his Ferrari. 'Stick with me and you'll learn how real men gamble. Last one back to Cannes's a sissy and buys the champagne. Right?'

He received a smile of appreciation from Brett. 'Right.'

Engines coughed into life and the two cars, hurling pebbles from their thrusting wheels, shot back towards the road. Seconds later, as the first rays of

sunlight appeared over the surrounding peaks, they were racing nose to tail down the twisting road that led back to the Cote d'Azur.

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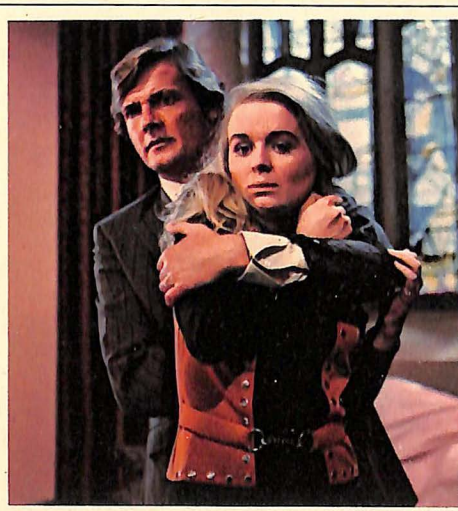

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